



Languedoc-Roussillon

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Why Go?

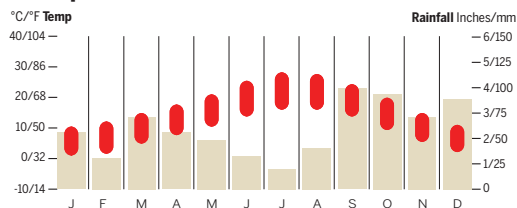
Languedoc-Roussillon comes in three distinct flavours. Bas-Languedoc (Lower Languedoc), land of bullfighting, rugby and robust red wines, thumbs its nose at more genteel Provence to its east. Here on the plain are the region's major towns: Montpellier, the vibrant capital; sun-baked Nîmes with its fine Roman amphitheatre; and fairy-tale Carcassonne, with its witches'-hat turrets.

Haut-Languedoc (Upper Languedoc) is a sparsely populated terrain. Its limestone hills, great for walking or huffing-puffing cycling, are covered with sparse grasses or cloaked in chestnut trees. Riddled with caves, the hills are split by deep gorges.

Roussillon gives more than a glance over the frontier to Spanish Catalonia, with which it shares a language and culture. Alongside its rocky coastline lies pretty Collioure, which drew the likes of Matisse and Picasso, while the Pyrenees, their foothills capped by stark, lonely Cathar fortresses, stretch westwards, culminating in mighty Mont Canigou, symbol of Catalan identity.

When to Go

Montpellier



April and May
Springtime walking or cycling in Haut-Languedoc.

Third weekend in September
Grape harvest and partying at Nîmes' Fêria des Vendanges.

September and October
Explore magical, still-warm Carcassonne after the summer crowds have left.

BAS-LANGUEDOC

Languedoc takes its name from *langue d'oc* (Occitan), a language closely related to Catalan and distinct from *langue d'oïl*, the forerunner of modern French spoken to the north (the words *oc* and *oïl* meant 'yes' in their respective languages). The plains of Bas-Languedoc boast all Languedoc's towns of consequence, its beaches, rich Roman heritage and France's largest wine-producing area.

Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Visigoths, Moors and Franks all passed through Languedoc. Around the 12th century, when Occitan was the language of the troubadours and the cultured speech of southern France, Occitania (today's Languedoc) reached its zenith. However, the Albigensian Crusade, launched in 1208 to suppress the 'heresy' of Catharism, led to Languedoc's annexation by the French kingdom. The treaty of Villers-Cotterêts (1539) made *langue d'oïl* the realm's official language, downgrading Occitan. Continuing to be spoken in the south, it enjoyed a literary revival in the 19th century, spearheaded by the poet Frédéric Mistral, who wrote in the Provençal variety of the language.

Nîmes

POP 146,500

Plough your way through the bleak, traffic-clogged outskirts of Nîmes to reach its true heart, still beating where the Romans established their town more than two millennia ago. Here you'll find some of France's best-preserved classical buildings, together with a few stunning modern constructions as the city continues its centuries-old rivalry with Montpellier, just along the autoroute.

The city's other, less obvious claim to fame is sartorial. During the 1849 Californian gold rush, one Levi Strauss was making trousers for miners. Looking for a tough, hard-wearing fabric, he began importing the traditionally blue *serge de Nîmes*, nowadays known as denim.

Sights

Les Arènes

ROMAN ARENA

(adult/child incl audioguide €7.80/4.50; ☉9am-6.30pm) Nîmes' magnificent Roman amphitheatre, the best preserved in the whole of the Roman Empire, was built around AD 100 to seat 24,000 spectators. It's easy to

forget, as one marvels at the architectural accomplishments of the Romans, what a nasty streak they had too. The arena hosted animal fights to the death, stag hunts, man against lion or bear confrontations and, of course, gladiatorial combats. In the contemporary arena, it's only the bulls that get killed. An advance of a kind, you might say.

There's a mock-up of the gladiators' quarters and, if you time it right, you'll see a couple of actors in full combat gear slugging it out in the arena.

Buy your ticket at the reception point, tucked into the northern walls.

Maison Carrée

ROMAN TEMPLE

(Square House; place de la Maison Carrée; adult/child €4.50/3.70; ☉10am-6.30pm) The Maison Carrée is a remarkably well preserved rectangular Roman temple, constructed around AD 5 to honour Emperor Augustus' two adopted sons. Within, a 22-minute 3D film, *Héros de Nîmes*, is screened every half-hour. An epic piece of flummery subtitled in English and French, it calls up characters from the city's history.

Carré d'Art

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

The striking glass and steel building facing the Maison Carrée and completed in 1993, is the Carré d'Art (Art Square). Within are the municipal library and **Musée d'Art Contemporain**. The work of British architect Sir Norman Foster, it's a wonderful, airy building with a great top-floor **restaurant** and terrace.

Jardins de la Fontaine

ROMAN REMAINS

Nîmes' other major Roman monuments enrich the elegant Jardins de la Fontaine (Fountain Gardens). The **Source de la Fontaine** was the site of a spring, temple and baths in Roman times. The remains of the **Temple de Diane** are in the lower northwest corner ('it is strictly forbidden to escalate this monument', says the quaint sign).

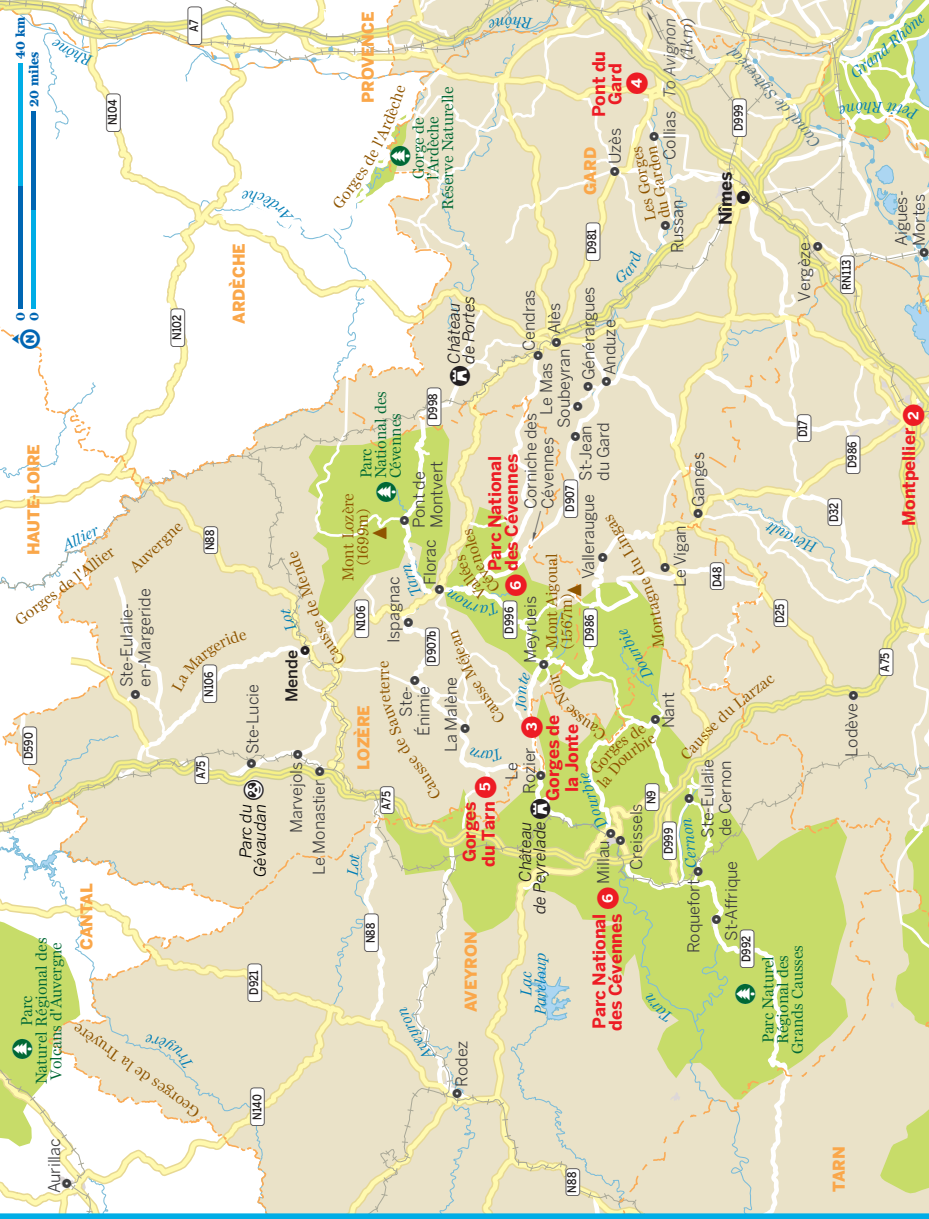


BILLET NÎMES ROMAINE

You can make something of a saving by purchasing a **combination ticket** (adult/child €9.90/7.60), valid for three days, that admits you to Les Arènes, Maison Carrée and Tour Magne. Pick one up at the first site you visit.

Languedoc-Roussillon Highlights

- 1** Gasp at your first glimpse of La Cité's witches'-hat turrets above **Carcassonne** (p730)
- 2** Spend a morning and more exploring the delights of Montpellier's **Musée Fabre** (p717)
- 3** Spot vultures looping and swooping high above **Gorges de la Jonte** (p739)
- 4** Swim under the bridge for an original perspective of the **Pont du Gard** (p712)
- 5** Drift lazily down the **Gorges du Tarn** (p737) in a canoe
- 6** Walk a stage or two of Robert Louis Stevenson's **donkey trek** (p735) in Parc National des Cévennes
- 7** Enjoy spectacular Pyrenean scenery



from the trundling
Train Jaune (Yellow
Train; p749), near
Villefranche-de-
Conflent

- 8** Take a slow boat
along the **Canal du**
Midi (p727)



A 10-minute uphill walk brings you to the crumbling shell of the 30m-high **Tour Magne** (adult/child €2.70/2.30; ☉9.30am-6.30pm), raised around 15 BC. Built as a display of imperial power, it's the largest of a chain of towers that once punctuated the city's 7km-long Roman ramparts. At the top of its 140 steps, there's an orientation table to help you interpret the magnificent panorama of Nîmes.

FREE Musée d'Art Contemporain

CONTEMPORARY ART

(place de la Maison Carrée; ☉10am-6pm, closed Monday) Within the Carré d'Art, the museum houses both permanent and rotating exhibitions of modern art. It merits a visit in its own right and to prowl the in-nards of this striking building.

Each of Nîmes' other museums follows a common timetable (open 10am to 6pm, closed Monday). Most are in sore need of a new broom.

FREE Musée du Vieux Nîmes

MUSEUM

(place aux Herbes) In the 17th-century episcopal palace, this small museum has, in addition to the usual period costumes and furniture, a whole room showcasing denim, with smiling pin-ups of Elvis, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

FREE Musée Archéologique

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

(13 bd Amiral Courbet) Nîmes' archaeological museum brings together Roman and pre-Roman tombs, mosaics, inscriptions and artefacts unearthed in and around the city. It also houses a hotchpotch of artefacts from Africa, piled high and tagged with yellowing captions such as 'Abyssinia' and 'Dahomey'.

FREE Musée d'Histoire Naturelle

MUSEUM

Sharing the same building as the Musée Archéologique, this museum has a musty collection of stuffed animals gazing bleakly out. Only the custodians, protected from visitors inside their own glass case, have life.

Musée des Beaux-Arts

ART MUSEUM

(Fine Arts Museum; rue de la Cité Foulc; adult/child €5/3.70) The city's fine-arts museum has a wonderfully preserved Roman mosaic (look down upon it from the 1st floor). This apart, it houses a fairly pedestrian collection of Flemish, Italian and French works.

🌟 Festivals & Events

In July and August there's an abundance of dance, theatre, rock, pop and jazz events. Year-round, the tourist office regularly updates its list of events, *Les Rendez-Vous de Nîmes*.

Les Grands Jeux Romains

ROMAN RE-CREATION

For two days in mid-April, Romans again take over town with an encampment, bread and circuses in Les Arènes and a triumphal street parade.

Féria de Pentecôte & Féria des Vendanges

WINE, BULLS

Nîmes becomes more Spanish than French during its two *férias* (bullfighting festivals): the five-day Féria de Pentecôte (Whitsuntide Festival) in June, and the three-day Féria des Vendanges celebrating the grape harvest on the third weekend in September. Each is marked by daily *corridos* (bullfights). The **Billetterie des Arènes** (☎04 66 02 80 90; www.arenedenimes.com; 2 rue de la Violette) sells tickets both to callers-in and via its website.

Judis de Nîmes

FOOD, MUSIC

Between 6pm and 10.30pm every Thursday in July and August, artists, artisans and vendors of local food specialities take over the main squares of central Nîmes, where there are also free concerts of music in all its many genres.

🛏 Sleeping

Royal Hôtel

HOTEL €€

(☎04 66 58 28 27; www.royalhotel-nimes.com, in French; 3 bd Alphonse Daudet; r €60-80; ☉☎) You can't squeeze this 21-room hotel, popular with visiting artists and raffishly bohemian, into a standard mould. Rooms, some with ceiling fans, others with air-con and nearly all with bathtubs, are furnished with flair. Most overlook pedestrian place d'Assas, a work of modern art in its own right – fine for the view, though the noise might be intrusive on summer nights.

Hôtel Amphithéâtre

HOTEL €

(☎04 66 67 28 51; <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/hotel-amphitheatre>; 4 rue des Arènes; s €41-45, d €53-70; ☉☎) The welcoming, family-run Amphithéâtre is just up the road from its namesake. Once a pair of 18th-century mansions, it has 15 rooms decorated in warm, woody colours, each named after a writer or painter. We suggest dipping into Montesquieu or Arrabal, both large and with a balcony



19 Ciné Sémaphore.....B4
20 Théâtre de Nîmes.....B2

overlooking pedestrian place du Marché. Rooms on the 3rd floor enjoy air-con.

Maison de l'Octroi

B&B €€

(0204 66 27 15 95; www.bed-breakfast-nimes.com; 209 chemin de Russan; r €80-85) Host Nicole Crès keeps her two *chambre d'hôte* rooms spick and span and serves delicious breakfasts. Rooms overlook a 5000-sq-metre garden shaded by oak and lime trees. Her house is 1.5km north of the city centre.

Auberge de Jeunesse

YOUTH HOSTEL €

(0204 66 68 03 20; www.hinimes.com; 257 chemin de l'Auberge de Jeunesse, la Cigale; dm/d €13.50/34; ☺closed Jan) This sterling, well-equipped youth hostel with self-catering facilities has everything from dorms to cute houses for two to six in its extensive grounds, 3.5km northwest of the train station. It rents out bikes (per day €14) and there's limited camping (per person €6.65). Take bus I, direction Alès or Villeverthe, and get off at the Stade stop.

New Hôtel La Baume

HOTEL €€

(0204 66 76 28 42; www.new-hotel.com; 21 rue Nationale; s/d €110/140; ☹@☺) In an unfashionable part of town and in fact far from new, this 34-room hotel occupies an attractive 17th-century town mansion with a glorious interior courtyard and twisting stairway. The bedrooms, decorated in sensuous ochre, beige and cream, blend the traditional and strictly contemporary.

Hôtel Central

HOTEL €

(0204 66 67 27 75; www.hotel-central.org; 2 place du Château; s/d €45/50; ☹) With its creaky floorboards and bunches of wildflowers painted on each bedroom door, this friendly hotel is full of character. Room 20, on the 5th floor, has great rooftop views.

Hôtel Imperator Concorde

HOTEL €€€

(0204 66 21 90 30; <http://nimes.concorde-hotels.com>; quai de la Fontaine; r €175-243; ☹@☺) This *grande dame* of Nîmes hotels is a favourite

of visiting matadors. Its bar, the 'Hemingway', commemorates the swaggering author's brief presence here in room 310. The 62 rooms are richly draped and furnished and there's a large garden with a playing fountain. Its highly regarded restaurant, **L'Enclos de la Fontaine**, is equally grand and distinguished.

Hôtel Acanthe du Temple

HOTEL €

(0204 66 67 54 61; www.hotel-temple.com; 1 rue Charles Babut; s €42-50, d €54-65; ☹@☺) At this long-established hotel, every room is neat and clean and has its own individual decor. Five rooms have air-con and the rest come with fans.

Camping Domaine de la Bastide

CAMPGROUND €

(0204 66 62 05 82; www.camping-nimes.com; rte de Générac; site & 2 people €14.90; ☺year-round) This shady campground with bar/restaurant and small children's playground is 4km south of town on the D13. Take bus D and get off at La Bastide, the terminus.



Eating

Nîmes' gastronomy owes as much to Provence as to Languedoc. Tasty southern delights, such as *aïoli* and *rouille* (mayonnaise of olive oil, garlic and chilli peppers), are as abundant as *cassoulet* (rich bean, pork and duck stew). Sample the Costières de Nîmes wines from the pebbly vineyards to the south.



Carré d'Art

CLASSIC FRENCH €€

(0204 66 67 52 40; www.restaurant-lecarredart.com, in French; 2 rue Gaston Boissier; 1-/2-/3-course menus €19/24/29; ☺closed Sun) This is a place to enjoy exceptional cuisine in sublimely tasteful surroundings. The classical decor with its gilded mirrors and moulded ceilings blends harmoniously with fresh flowers, bright, contemporary artwork, cascading, feather-light chandeliers and *sotto voce* canned jazz.



Le Marché sur la Table

MODERN FRENCH €€

(0204 66 67 22 50; 10 rue Littré; mains €17-19; ☹Wed-Sun) You *could* just pop in for a glass of wine at this friendly spot, run by up-and-coming young chef Éric Vidal (see his impressive culinary credentials on the toilet wall, no less) and his partner, Caroline. But you'd be missing a lot. Éric buys fresh and organic from the nearby food market, his fish is never farmed and Caroline maintains a large selection of local wines. Eat in

THE CROCODILE OF NÎMES

Around town and in tourist literature, you'll see the city's shield: a crocodile chained to a palm tree. It recalls the city's foundation, when retiring Roman legionnaires who had sweated with Caesar during his River Nile campaign, were granted land to cultivate hereabouts.

the attractively furnished interior or quiet, green rear courtyard.

Au Plaisir des Halles MEDITERRANEAN €€
(☎04 66 36 01 02; 4 rue Littré; mains €24-30; ☺Tue-Sat) Ingredients here are the freshest and the lunchtime three-course *menu* (€20) is excellent value. The photo portraits around the walls are of the winegrowers whose produce features on its impressive list of Languedoc vintages. Located just along the road from the covered market.

Le 9 BAR, RESTAURANT €€
(☎04 66 21 80 77; 9 rue de l'Étoile; mains €15-18, lunch menu €15; ☺Mon-Sat & lunch Sun May-Sep) Have a meal or simply drop in for a drink at this mildly eccentric place, tucked away behind high green doors with just a sign swinging outside. Eat in the vast, arched former stables or in the leafy, vine-clad courtyard. Everything except the lunch *menu* is à la carte.

Les Olivades RESTAURANT, WINE €€
(☎04 66 21 71 78; 18 rue Jean Reboul; mains around €13, lunch/dinner menus €12/22; ☺Tue-Fri & dinner Sat) To the rear of this excellent wine shop, which alone justifies a visit, there's an intimate dining area, where Madame in the kitchen and her husband as maître will treat you royally.

Self-Catering

There are colourful Thursday markets in the old city in July and August. Year-round, Nîmes' **covered food market** (rue Général Perrier) offers riches for the picnic hamper.

Maison Villaret BAKERY
(13 rue de la Madeleine) This family bakery makes 25 different kinds of bread, cakes, biscuits and local specialities such as *caladons* (honey and almond-studded biscuits).

L'Oustaù Nadal GOURMET FOOD
(place aux Herbes; ☺closed Mon) Packed with goodies such as brandade, tapenade, honey from the hills and virgin olive oil, including three kinds on draught.



Drinking

Place aux Herbes and place du Marché become bustling, communal outdoor cafés in summer. For somewhere more tranquil, sip a drink on place d'Assas, the creation of quirky French artist Martial Rayse.

Le Ciel de Nîmes ROOFTOP BAR
(☎04 66 36 71 70; place de la Maison Carrée; ☺10am-6pm Tue-Sun year-round, to 10.30pm

Fri & Sat May-Sep) On the rooftop terrace of the Carré d'Art, this is the perfect place for a relaxing drink, lording it over the hubbub in the square below. It also does tasty, filling and delightfully presented **lunches** (€16 to €28).

Grand Café de la Bourse et du Commerce CAFÉ
(bd des Arènes) This vast, flamboyant café, right opposite Les Arènes, is a great spot for breakfast, a quick coffee or a sun-downer, either on the terrace or inside.

La Bodeguita BAR
(place d'Assas; ☺Mon-Sat) With a Spanish click of the heels and attached to the Royal Hôtel, this is a popular venue for the local intelligentsia. On summer evenings, there's often live music.



Entertainment

Les Arènes is the major venue for outdoor spectacles such as concerts, pageants and bullfights.

Ciné Sémaphore CINEMA
(☎04 66 67 83 11; www.semafore.free.fr, in French; 25 rue Porte de France) Has five screens and shows nondubbed films.

Théâtre de Nîmes THEATRE
(☎04 66 36 02 04; www.theatredenimes.com, in French; place de la Calade) The major venue for drama and music.



Information

Net@Games (place de la Maison Carrée; per hr €2; ☺9am-1am Mon-Fri, noon-1am Sat & Sun) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎04 66 58 38 00; www.ot-nimes.fr; 6 rue Auguste; ☺8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6.30pm Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Rents out audioguides to central Nîmes (one/two terminals €8/10).



Getting There & Away

AIR Nîmes' **airport** (☎04 66 70 49 49), 10km southeast of the city on the A54, is served only by Ryanair, which flies to/from London (Luton) and Liverpool in the UK.

BUS The **bus station** (☎04 66 38 59 43; rue Ste-Félicité) connects with the train station. International operators **Eurolines** (☎08 92 89 90 91) and **Line Bus** (☎04 66 29 50 62) both have kiosks there.

A single journey anywhere within in the Gard *département* costs only €1.50. Among the regional destinations:

Pont du Gard 30 minutes, two to seven daily
Uzès 45 minutes, four to 10 daily

CAR & MOTORCYCLE Avis, Europcar and Hertz have kiosks at both the airport and the train station.

TRAIN More than 12 TGVs daily run to/from Paris Gare de Lyon (€52 to €99.70, three hours). Frequent trains serve the following:

Alès €8.50, 40 minutes

Arles €7.50, 30 minutes

Avignon €8.50, 30 minutes

Marseille €19, 1¼ hours

Montpellier €8.60, 30 minutes

Sète €12.20, one hour

i Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT An **airport bus** (€5, 30 minutes) meets and greets Ryanair flights, leaving from the train station. To confirm times, call ☎04 66 29 27 29.

BICYCLE **Commavélo** (☎06 07 41 80 61; www.commavelo.com; 28 rue Émile Jamais; ☉9.30am-1pm & 2-7pm) rents out town bikes (per half-day/full day/three days €7/12/30) and mountain bikes (per half-day/full day/three days €9/15/37.50).

Drivers who leave their vehicles in the car parks of Les Arènes or place d'Assas can borrow a town bike for free. Present your parking ticket at the pay desk.

TAXI Call ☎04 66 29 40 11.

Around Nîmes

PERRIER PLANT

Ever wondered how they get the bubbles into a bottle of Perrier water? Or why it's that stubby shape? Take the one-hour tour in French of **Perrier's bottling plant** (☎04 66 87 61 01; adult/child €5/2; ☉tours approx hourly 10am-4pm Mon-Fri). In Vergèze, on the RN113, 13km southwest of Nîmes, it fills around 400 million bottles of mineral water each year. We trust their tongue is firmly in their cheek when they advertise *dégustation gratuite* (free tasting)! Call to reserve.

PONT DU GARD

Pont du Gard

ROMAN AQUEDUCT

A Unesco World Heritage Site, this exceptionally well-preserved, three-tiered Roman aqueduct was once part of a 50km-long system of water channels built around 19 BC to bring water from nearby Uzès to Nîmes. The scale is huge: the 35 arches of its 275m-long upper tier, running 50m above the River Gard, contain a watercourse designed to carry 20,000 cu metres



PONT DU GARD ADMISSION

Car and up to five passengers

April to October €15, November to March €10

Cyclists and walkers Free entry to the site, admission to museum, film and Ludo €10

Evening hours Free parking and entry to the site after 7pm or 8pm May to September, after 6pm October to April

of water per day. Each and every construction block (the largest weigh over five tonnes) was hauled from quarries near and far by cart or raft.

It's about a 400m walk, with excellent wheelchair access, from car parks on both left and right banks of the River Gard to the bridge itself. The road bridge, built in 1743, runs parallel with the aqueduct's lower tier. The best, least encumbered view is from upstream, where you can swim on hot days.

Its **visitors centre** (☎04 66 37 50 99; www.pontdugard.fr; ☉9.30-7pm May-Sep; to 5pm or 6pm Oct-Apr) on the left, northern bank, rents out multilingual **audioguides** (€6).

Museo de la Romanité

INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

Do take in this vast, hugely informative and innovative, high-tech Museum of the Roman World, which has captions and signs in English. Within the complex's cinema, a 25-minute large-screen **film** (screenings in English at noon and 3pm) shows the bridge from land and air. Though there's little danger of boredom hereabouts, children can have a fun learning experience at **Ludo**, an adjacent activity play area for five- to 12-year olds.

Mémoires de Garrigue

WALK

To leave the crowds behind, walk, for free, this 1.4km trail with interpretive signs as it winds through typical Mediterranean bush and scrubland. You'll need to borrow or buy the explanatory booklet in English (€4) to get the most out of it.

i Getting There & Away

The Pont du Gard is 21km northeast of Nîmes and 26km west of Avignon. Buses normally stop on the D981, 500m north of the visitors centre. In summer, some buses make a diversion to the Pont du Gard car park.

Edgard (www.edgard-transport.fr, in French) bus B21 runs three to seven times daily to/from Nîmes, while bus A15 leaves Avignon three to six times daily.

Parking in the extensive car parks on each bank of the river costs €5.

RIVER GARD

The wild, unpredictable River Gard descends from the Cévennes mountains. Torrential rains can raise the water level by as much as five metres in a flash. During long dry spells, by contrast, sections may disappear completely, as the water continues to trickle through an underground channel.

The river has sliced itself a meandering gorge (Les Gorges du Gardon) through the hills from **Russan** to the village of **Collias**, about 6km upstream from the Pont du Gard. The GR6 long-distance hiking trail runs beside it most of the way.

In Collias, 4km west of the D981, **Le Tourbillon** (☎04 66 22 85 54; www.canoe-le-tourbillon.com), **Kayak Vert** (☎04 66 22 80 76; www.canoe-france.com/gardon) and **Canoë Collias** (☎04 66 22 87 20; www.canoe-collias.com, in French) rent out kayaks and canoes. Kayak Vert also offers mountain-bike hire.

You can paddle 8km down to the Pont du Gard (€20 per person, two hours), or arrange to be dropped upstream at Russan, from where a great 23km descent leads back to Collias through Gorges du Gardon (€30, full day). The latter's usually possible only between March and mid-June, when the river is high enough.

UZÈS

POP 8450

Uzès, 25km northeast of Nîmes, once derived wealth from silk, linen and, bizarrely, liquorice. When all three industries collapsed, it went through hard times. But it's again on the upsurge thanks to tourism, as visitors come to enjoy its faithfully restored Renaissance facades, impressive Duché (Ducal Palace) and splendid place aux Herbes, the shady, arcaded central square, all odd angles and off-kilter.



SUMMER SPECIAL

Think of an evening return to see the **Pont du Gard** in a very special light. Every night from sunset to midnight, it's spectacularly illuminated. There's free parking from 7pm.

Farmers from all around sell their produce at the **market**, held each Wednesday and Saturday on place aux Herbes.

👁 Sights & Activities

The tourist office's free multilingual pamphlet, *Uzès: Premier Duché de France*, describes a walking tour of the historic centre's highlights.

Jardin Médiéval

GARDEN

(Medieval Garden; adult/child €4/2; ☀10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Apr-Oct) This delightful garden, set back from rue Port Royal, basks in the shadow of the Duché's keep. It's bright with medieval plants and flowers, impressively researched and documented (with English translation too).

Musée du Bonbon

SWEET MUSEUM

(Pont des Charrettes; adult/child €6/4; ☀10am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun, daily Jul-Sep, closed Jan) Here's a place for a little indulgence. A plaque at the entrance declares 'This museum is dedicated to all who have devoted their lives to a slightly guilty passion – greed'. All signs at this candy museum belonging to manufacturers Haribo are multilingual. Parents will be pestered to purchase kilos of goodies at wholesale prices.

Duché

CHÂTEAU

(www.duche-uzes.fr; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm) This fortified château belonged to the Dukes of Uzès for more than 1000 years. Altered almost continuously from the 11th to 18th century, it has fine period furniture, tapestries and paintings. You can take the French-language one-hour **guided tour** (€16/12 per adult/child) or wander at will around the **keep** (admission €11).

🌟 Festivals & Events

Foire aux Truffes

TRUFFLE FAIR

A full-blown truffle fair, the third Sunday in January.

Foire à l'Ail

GARLIC FAIR

Uzès positively reeks during its garlic fair on 24 June.

Nuits Musicales d'Uzès

MUSIC FESTIVAL

An international festival of baroque music and jazz in the second half of July.

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

TOP CHOICE Hôtel Restaurant du Général d'Entraigues

HOTEL, RESTAURANT €€

(☎04 66 22 32 68; www.hoteldentraigues.com, in French; place de l'Évêché; r €90-130; 🍷🍷🍷) Trace your way through history as you

explore this hotel, an amalgamation of four private houses dating from the 15th to 18th centuries. It's an agreeable mix of odd angles, low beams, arches, crannies, corridors and staircases that may or may not lead somewhere. Modern touches include air-con in the majority of its 36 rooms and a small elevated pool where breakfast diners can watch early morning swimmers – from below. The hotel restaurant, **Les Jardins de Castille** (menus €15-21), offers contemporary cuisine in an equally traditional setting.



Terroirs

CAFÉ-GOURMET FOOD €

(www.enviedeterroirs.com; 5 place aux Herbes; snacks around €4.50, mixed platters €10-14; ☉9am-10.30pm, to 6pm Oct-Mar) Snack copiously under the deep arcades or on the cobbled square at this restaurant and delicatessen, where Tom and Corinne Graisse source nearly all their goods locally. Their mixed platters and toasted open sandwiches are filled with delights, described explicitly in the English version of the menu.



Shopping

Maison de la Truffe

TRUFFLES

(27 place aux Herbes) At the splendid Maison de la Truffe, it's truffles with everything – adding aroma to chocolate, steeped in oil, bagged with rice and much more.



Information

The **tourist office** (☎04 66 22 68 88; www.uzes-tourisme.com; ☉10am-6pm or 7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat & Sun, closed Sat afternoon & Sun Oct-May) is on place Albert I, just outside the old quarter. It rents out **audioguides** (€5) for a self-guided walking tour.



Getting There & Away

The bus station – grandly named and in fact merely a bus stop – is on av de la Libération, beside Banque Populaire. Buses running between Avignon (one hour) and Alès (50 minutes) call by three to five times daily. There are also at least five daily services to/from Nîmes (45 minutes). All journeys cost only €1.50.

Alès & Around

POP 41,100

Alès, 45km from Nîmes and 70km from Montpellier, snuggles against the River Gard. Gateway to the Cévennes, it's the Gard *département's* second-largest town. Coal was mined here from the 13th century, when monks first dug into the surrounding hills, until the last pit closed in 1986.

The pedestrianised heart of town, which long ago shed its sooty past, is bright with flowers in summer.



Sights & Activities

Train à Vapeur des Cévennes

STEAM TRAIN

(www.trainavapeur.com; adult/child one-way €10/6.50, return €13/8; ☉Apr-Oct) This authentic steam train takes 40 minutes to chug the 13km between St-Jean du Gard and Anduze, calling at the Bambouseraie and making three to four return trips each day.

Mine Témoin

COALMINE MUSEUM

(www.mine-temoin.fr, in French; chemin de la Cité Ste-Marie; adult/child €7/4.50; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mar-mid-Nov) Don a safety helmet, arm yourself with the guide booklet in English and take the cage down to explore an actual mine in Alès that was used to train apprentice colliers. Preceded by a 20-minute video (in French), the one-hour guided tour (in French) leads you along 700m of underground galleries. Slip on a sweater since the temperature underground rarely reaches 16°C.

Musée du Désert

HUGUENOT MUSEUM

(Museum of the Wilderness; www.museedudesert.com; adult/child €5/4; ☉9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mar-Nov) The Musée du Désert portrays the way of life of the Huguenots (see boxed text, p715), their persecution, clandestine resistance for more than a century and emigration of up to half a million to more tolerant lands. It's in the charming hamlet of Le Mas Soubeyran, 5.5km north of the Bambouseraie.

Bambouseraie de Prafrance

TROPICAL GARDENS

(www.bambouseraie.com; adult/child €8/4.50; ☉9.30am-dusk Mar-mid-Nov) It's over 150 years since the first shoots of this rambling, mature bamboo grove were planted by a spice merchant returning from the tropics. Here in Générargues, 12km southwest of Alès, 150 bamboo species sprout amid aquatic gardens, a Laotian village and a Japanese garden. The Cévennes steam train stops right beside the reception.

La Caracole

SNAIL FARM

(☎04 66 25 65 70; www.lacaracole.fr; adult/child €6/4; ☉tours 4.30pm & 6.30pm Jul & Aug, 3pm & 4.30pm Wed & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep) Here's one to make the kids squirm. La Caracole, with a cast of over 250,000, presents 'the astonishing, exciting world of the snail'. In this snail

THE CAMISARD REVOLT

Early in the 18th century, a guerrilla war raged through the Cévennes as Protestants took on Louis XIV's army. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 removed rights that the Protestant Huguenots had enjoyed since 1598. Many emigrated, while others fled deep into the wild Cévennes, from where a local leader, Roland Laporte, only 22 at the time, led the resistance against the French army sent to crush them.

Poorly equipped, the outlaws resisted for two years. They fought in their shirts (*camiso* in *langue d'oc*); hence their popular name, Camisards. Once the royal army gained the upper hand, the local population was either massacred or forced to flee. Their leader was killed and most villages were destroyed.

On the first Sunday of September, thousands of French Protestants meet at Roland's birthplace in Le Mas Soubeyran. It's now the Musée du Désert (p714), which details the persecution of Protestants in the Cévennes between 1685 and the 1787 Edict of Tolerance, which marked the reintroduction of religious freedom.

farm's appropriately small museum, there's information on – oh yes – the snail in religion, the snail in art and the snail through the centuries. After the tour (in simultaneous English and French), there's free sampling and the chance to buy a tin or two of former farm members embalmed in a variety of tempting sauces. It's in St-Florent sur Auzonnet, 12km from Alès. Take the D904 northwards (towards Aubenas), then turn left onto the D59.

Sleeping & Eating

Mas de Rochebelle

B&B €€

(☎04 66 30 57 03; www.masderochebelle.fr; 44 chemin de la Cité Ste-Marie; s €55-70, d €70-90; ☺) Near the Mine Témoin, this welcoming *chambre d'hôte* in Alès was once the mine director's residence. It has five attractive rooms and a vast garden, where you can wander, swim or simply relax under its magnificent yew tree. No credit cards.

Hôtel Restaurant Le Riche

HOTEL €

(☎04 66 86 00 33; www.leriche.fr, in French; 42 place Pierre Sépard; s/d €52/68; ☺closed Aug; ☺☺) Opposite the train station in Alès, this great-value hotel is highly recommended as much for its 19 pleasant, modern rooms as for the fine cuisine of its **restaurant** (menus €21-50) with its attentive service and wonderful stucco mouldings.

Camping la Croix Clémentine

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 66 86 52 69; www.clementine.fr, in French; site & 2 people according to season €14-26.60; ☺Apr-Sep; ☺) This campground is in Cendras, 5km northwest of Alès. Sites, within or on the fringes of an oak wood, are shady

and there are plenty of activities to keep the children occupied.

Information

The Alès **tourist office** (☎04 66 52 32 15; www.ville-ales.fr, in French; place Hôtel de Ville; ☺9am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Sat, also 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug) occupies a modern building set into the shell of a baroque chapel.

Getting There & Away

BUS From the **Gare Routière** (☎04 66 52 31 31; place Pierre Sépard), beside the train station, one bus heads into the Cévennes to Florac (€13, 1¼ hours, Monday to Saturday mid-April to mid-September, Wednesday and Saturday only rest of the year), and three to five serve Uzès (€1.50, 50 minutes), most continuing to Avignon (€1.50, 1¾ hours).

TRAIN There are up to 10 trains daily to/from Montpellier (€15, 1½ hours), some requiring a change in Nîmes (€8.45, 40 minutes).

Montpellier

POP 257,100

The 17th-century philosopher John Locke may have had one glass of Minervois wine too many when he wrote: 'I find it much better to go twice (sic) to Montpellier than once to the other world'. It stops short of paradise, but Montpellier, where students make up around a third of the population, is innovative, fast-growing, self-confident and a worthy rival to Toulouse for the title of southern France's most vital city. Two high-speed tram routes – with a third under construction – cut across this most pedestrian-friendly of cities, where more



than 12,000 parking spaces, over 1000 bikes for borrowing and around 150km of cycling paths encourage motorists to leave their cars behind.

One of the few cities in southern France without a Roman heritage, Montpellier started late-ish. Founded by the Counts of Toulouse, it's first mentioned in a written document in 985. By medieval times, it had become a prosperous city with trading links all over the Mediterranean. Its scholastic tradition is a long one: Europe's first medical school was founded here in the 12th century. The population swelled dramatically in the 1960s when many French settlers left independent Algeria and settled here.

Montpellier owes much of its contemporary style and swagger (such as the mammoth 1980s neoclassical housing project of Antigone) to Georges Frêche. Constantly controversial and locally revered, he ruled as mayor from 1977 until 2004.



Sights

Musée Fabre

ART GALLERY

(www.museefabre.fr; 39 bd Bonne Nouvelle; adult/child €6/4, with Département des Art Décoratifs €7/5; ☎10am-6pm Tue & Thu-Sun, 1-9pm Wed) A delightfully spacious, superbly lit venue

with one of France's richest collections of European works from the 16th century onwards, plus seven galleries of bright, dynamic 20th-century art. Its annexe, the recently opened **Département des Arts Décoratifs** displays in context elegant 18th- and 19th-century furniture, ceramics and jewellery.

Serre Amazonienne

RAINFOREST SIMULATION

(www.zoo.montpellier.fr, in French; 50 av Agropolis; adult/child €6/2.50, audioguide €2; ☎9am-5pm or 7pm) A 10-minute walk from Agropolis, this is a spectacular appendix to Montpellier's zoo. A humid hothouse replicates the Amazonian rainforest. Piranha and alligators swim in the first two tanks but it gets friendlier as you progress. Stars include a pair of bright-eyed young leopards, a family of Bolivian squirrel monkeys and flitting bats. Afterwards, you can explore the rest of the zoo, France's second-largest, for free.

Agropolis

INTERPRETIVE CENTRE

(www.museum.agropolis.fr; 951 av Agropolis; adult/child €5/free; ☎10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri & some weekends) Agropolis, 4km north of the centre, is all about food and how people around the world grow it. Historically, it follows our progression from

Montpellier

👁 Top Sights

Musée Fabre..... D3

👁 Sights

- 1 Arc de Triomphe..... A3
- 2 Hôtel de Varennes..... C3
Hôtel des Trésoriers de France..... (see 7)
- 3 Hôtel St-Côme..... C5
- 4 Jardin des Plantes Entrance..... A1
- 5 Musée Atger..... A2
- 6 Musée de l'Histoire de
Montpellier..... C4
Musée du Vieux Montpellier..... (see 2)
- 7 Musée Languedocien..... C4

🛏 Sleeping

- 8 Auberge de Jeunesse..... C1
- 9 Hôtel de la Comédie..... D4
- 10 Hôtel des Étuves..... C5
- 11 Hôtel du Palais..... A3
- 12 Hôtel Le Guilhem..... A3

🍴 Eating

- 13 Halles Castellane..... B4
- 14 Halles Laissac..... B6

- 15 Insensé..... D3
- 16 La Diligence..... C3
- 17 La Girafe..... B3
- 18 Le Petit Jardin..... A2
- 19 Les Bains de Montpellier..... C5
- 20 Mesdames Messieurs..... C3
- 21 Tamarillos..... C3
- 22 Tripti Kulai..... C4

🍷 Drinking

- 23 Café Latitude..... A3
- 24 Chez Boris..... C3
- 25 Le Huit..... C4
- 26 L'Heure Bleue..... C3

🎪 Entertainment

- 27 Café de la Mer..... C3
- 28 Le Corum..... D2
Le Heaven..... (see 27)
- 29 Opéra-Comédie..... C5
- 30 Rockstore..... D6

🛍 Shopping

- 31 Le Bookshop..... B4
- 32 Les Cinq Continents..... C4

hunter-gatherer to supermarket shopper. Fascinating stuff, it's instructive, enjoyable and pitched at both children and adults. For this and Serre Amazonienne, take tram 1 to the St-Eloi stop, from where a regular shuttle bus does a circular route.

Odysseum

LEISURE COMPLEX

At the end of tram line 1 and 3.5km east of the centre, this leisure complex has an ice rink, planetarium, multiscreen cinema and, in particular, **Aquarium Mare Nostrum** (adult/child €12.50/9; ☀10am-7pm, 8pm or 10pm), which takes you through 15 different aquatic environments, from polar waters to tropical forests.

Hôtels Particulier

HISTORIC MANSIONS

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Montpellier's wealthier merchants built grand private mansions, often externally quite sober but with resplendent inner courtyards (mostly, alas, closed to the public). Fine examples are **Hôtel de Varennes** (2 place Pétrarque), a harmonious 18th-century makeover of an originally medieval structure, and **Hôtel St-Côme** (Grand Rue Jean Moulin), nowadays the city's Chamber of Commerce. The 17th-century **Hôtel des Trésoriers de France** (7 rue Jacques Cœur) today houses the Musée Languedocien. Within the old quarter are several other such mansions, each marked by a descriptive plaque in French.

Place Royale du Peyrou & Around

ESPLANADE, GARDENS

At the eastern end of this wide, tree-lined esplanade is the **Arc de Triomphe** (1692). From the **Château d'Eau**, an elaborate hexagonal water tower at its western limit, stretches the **Aqueduc de St-Clément**, spectacularly illuminated at night. North of the esplanade is the **Jardin des Plantes** (☀noon-6pm or 8pm Tue-Sun; entry on bd Henri IV), France's oldest botanical garden, laid

out in 1593 and still used as a research resource by the University of Montpellier.

Montpellier has several stimulating museums that catalogue its rich history:

Musée Languedocien ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM
(7 rue Jacques Cœur; adult/student €6/3; ☀3-6pm Mon-Sat) Displays the area's rich archaeological finds from its earliest days as well as 16th- to 19th-century objets d'art.

FREE Musée du Vieux Montpellier

HISTORY MUSEUM

(2 place Pétrarque; ☀9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sat) A storehouse of the city's memorabilia from the Middle Ages to the Revolution.

Musée de l'Histoire de Montpellier

HISTORY MUSEUM

(place Jean Jaurès; admission incl audioguide €1.60; ☀10.30-11.45am & 1.30-5.15pm Tue-Sat) Down among the remains of the crypt of the church of Notre Dame des Tables, this museum offers a rather plodding 35-minute version of the city's history enlivened by the high-tech presentation.

FREE Musée Atger

ART MUSEUM

(2 rue de l'École de Médecine; ☀1.30-5.45pm Mon, Wed & Fri Sep-Jul) Within the medical faculty, this museum displays a striking collection of French, Italian and Flemish drawings.

★ ★ Festivals & Events

Printemps des Comédiens ARTS FESTIVAL
(www.printempsdescomediens.com) A music, dance and theatre festival in June.

Montpellier Danse

DANCE FESTIVAL

(www.montpellierdanse.com, in French) A two-week international dance festival in June or July.

Festival de Radio France et Montpellier

MUSIC FESTIVAL

(www.festivalradiofrancemontpellier.com, in French) Top-notch classical music and opera, plus a parallel program of free concerts of all musical genres, in the second half of July.

Sleeping

TOP CHOICE Hôtel Le Guilhem

HOTEL €€

(☎04 67 52 90 90; www.hotel-le-guilhem.com; 18 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; s €85, d €96-192; ☀@☎) Occupying a couple of inter-connecting 16th-century buildings, Hôtel Le Guilhem's 35 rooms are exquisitely and



CITY CARD

The **Montpellier City Card** (per 1/2/3 days €12/19/25, children half-price), sold at the tourist office, allows free or reduced admission to several sites and spectacles, plus unlimited bus and tram travel and a place on a guided walking tour. Ask at the tourist office for the latest offers.

individually furnished. Nearly all overlook the tranquil garden of nearby Restaurant Le Petit Jardin. Room 100 (€158) has its own little terrace and garden. It's wise to reserve at any time of year; Le Guilhem has faithful clientele who return again and again. Free wi-fi.

Hôtel du Parc

HOTEL €€

(☎04 67 41 16 49; www.hotelduparc-montpellier.com, in French; 8 rue Achille-Bégé; s €68-75, d €83-90, s/d with shower €46/53; ☎☎) At this 18th-century former *hôtel particulier* with its grand curling wrought-iron staircase, bibelots and knick-knacks add an at-home touch to each of the 19 individually decorated rooms (ask for room 7, bedchamber of the previous owner, Comte Vivier de Châtelard). Those on the ground floor have a small balcony. To get here, head north from place Albert I along av Faubourg Boutonnet.

Hôtel des Arceaux

HOTEL €

(☎04 67 92 03 03; www.hoteldesarceaux.com; 33-35 bd des Arceaux; s €54-65, d €65-70; ☎☎) This delightful town house, tucked beneath an aqueduct, is in a village-like cranny of Montpellier that's a mere 10-minute walk from the centre. Enjoy breakfast, brunch or dinner in the tranquil garden.

Hôtel du Palais

HOTEL €€

(☎04 67 60 47 38; www.hoteldupalais-montpellier.fr; 3 rue du Palais des Guilhem; s €66, d €72-85; ☎☎) All 26 rooms of this delightful hotel are decorated by a local artist and tastefully and individually furnished. With its wrought-iron balconies, oyster-grey shutters and flower boxes overlooking a quiet square, it will seduce you instantly.

Hôtel des Étuves

HOTEL €

(☎04 67 60 78 19; www.hoteldesetuves.fr; 24 rue des Étuves; s €31-42, d €39-49; ☎☎) This welcoming, 13-room family hotel, creeping around a spiral staircase like a vine, offers exceptional value. Rooms are simple but functional and the six overlooking the quiet pedestrian street are beautifully sunlit. Does not take credit cards.

Hôtel de la Comédie

HOTEL €

(☎04 67 58 43 64; hoteldelacomédie@cegetel.net; 1bis rue Baudin; s €42-49, d €52-69; ☎☎) This friendly, family-run place, just off place de la Comédie, is a favourite with visiting musicians and theatre troupes. All 20 rooms have air-con, heating and double-glazing.

Auberge de Jeunesse

YOUTH HOSTEL €

(☎04 67 60 32 22; montpellier@fuaj.org; 2 impasse de la Petite Corratierie; €16.70 incl breakfast; ☎closed Dec; ☎) Montpellier's HI-affiliated youth hostel is just off rue des Écoles Laïques. Rooms sleep two to 10 and there's a small, shaded garden. Take the tram to the Louis Blanc stop.

Camping Oasis Palavasienne

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 67 15 11 61; www.oasis-palavasienne.com; rte de Palavas; site according to season €16-33; ☎mid-Apr-mid-Sep; ☎) This shady campground has a large heated pool with water-slide, sauna, children's playground, bar and restaurant. Take bus 17 from the bus station. The campground runs a free shuttle bus to the beach resort of Palavas, 4km away.



Eating

You'll find plenty of cheap and cheerful eateries on rue de l'Université, rue des Écoles Laïques and the streets interlinking them.

La Girafe

FUSION €€

(☎04 67 54 48 89; 14 rue du Palais des Guilhem; mains €15-18; ☎Tue-Sat) You're indeed greeted by a tall model giraffe as you enter. Dine in the intimate downstairs area with its ox-blood-red decor and original artwork, or upstairs beneath the cross arches of this former chapel. Chef Pascal Schmitt gets his ingredients fresh from the market and nothing but nothing comes from the freezer. Try the heavenly breast of chicken rolled around prawns with fresh coriander and satay sauce.

Le Petit Jardin

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎04 67 60 78 78; www.petit-jardin.com, in French; 20 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; mains €22-29, lunch menus €17-33; ☎mid-May-mid-Oct, closed Mon rest of year) The Little Garden is just that: a restaurant offering imaginative cuisine, its big bay windows overlooking a shady, fairy-tale greenness at the rear. The menu, with its hints of Asian fusion, is short, simple yet with plenty of variety.



Tamarillos

FRUIT & FLOWERS €€

(☎04 67 60 06 00; http://tamarillos.biz; 2 place du Marché aux Fleurs; mains €24-34, menus €38-88) 'A cuisine of fruit and flowers' is Tamarillos' motto and, indeed, all dishes, sweet or savoury, have fruit as an ingredient or main element. Chef Philippe Chapon is *double champion de France de dessert* and taught a young Gordon Ramsay his pastry cooking. Go for a full meal or

nibble on a lunchtime salad (€14 to €19) or special (€15).

Mesdames Messieurs MODERN FRENCH €€
(04 67 63 49 53; www.mesdamesmessieurs.com, in French; 5 rue de Girone; mains €13-19; 7pm-1am Tue-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun; ♀) As much wine bar as restaurant, this hip new venue serves mainly organic produce and has a selection of at least 15 wines by the glass. Its copious Sunday brunch (€23) will set you up for the whole day.

Les Bains de Montpellier FISH, FRENCH €€
(04 67 60 70 87; www.les-bains-de-montpellier.com; 6 rue Richelieu; mains €21-25, menu €24; ♀Tue-Sat) This former public bathhouse is now a highly recommended restaurant. Tables are set around the old perimeter bathrooms where you can almost hear the gurgle and slurp of long-emptied tubs. For something light, try the *assiette des Bains*, a platter with salads, pasta, garnishes, vegetables and a hint of meat. If you're hungrier, select from its prime quality fish dishes.

Insensé MUSEUM RESTAURANT €€
(04 67 58 97 78; Musée Fabre; mains around €15, 2-/3-course lunch €21/28; ♀Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Restaurant of Musée Fabre, Insensé is just as contemporary and tasteful as you'd expect from such a venue. The dominant shade is black: tables, chairs, floor tiles – even the pepper pots. The innovative cuisine is altogether more colourful.

Le Ban des Gourmands TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€
(04 67 65 00 85; www.bandesgourmands.com, in French; 5 place Carnot; mains €16-27, menu €28; ♀Tue-Sat) Jacques and Catherine Delépine serve delicious classic cuisine at this appealing restaurant, a favourite of locals in the know, tucked away south of the train station.

La Diligence TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€
(04 67 66 12 21; 2 place Pétrarque; lunch menus €15-20, dinner menus €26-63; ♀Tue-Fri, dinner Sat & Mon) Dine beneath attractive vaults and arches at this former cloth warehouse. Savour the creative cuisine, impressive wine cellar and elegant rear patio overlooked by a gallery of the Hôtel de Varennes.

Tripti Kulai VEGETARIAN FUSION €
(04 67 66 30 51; 20 rue Jacques Cœur; salads €9.50, menus €12-16.50; ♀noon-9.30pm Mon-Sat; ♀) Barrel-vaulted and cosy, this popular vegetarian restaurant and tea house stands out for its juices and the originality

of many of its dishes, culled from world cuisine.

Self-Catering
The city's food markets include **Halles Castellane** (rue de la Loge), which is the biggest, and **Halles Laissac** (rue Anatole France).

There's a Saturday **organic food market** under the arches of Aqueduc de St-Clément and a **farmers market** every Sunday morning on av Samuel de Champlain in the Antigone complex, just east of the town centre.

Drinking

With nearly 80,000 students, Montpellier has a multitude of places to drink and dance. You'll find dense concentrations around rue En-Gondeau, off Grand Rue Jean Moulin, around place Jean Jaurès and around the intersection of rue de l'Université and rue de la Candolle.

Place de la Comédie (known to locals as *l'œuf*, the egg, for its ovoid shape) is alive with cafés where you can drink, grab a quick bite and watch street entertainers strut their stuff. Another popular venue is smaller, more intimate place St-Ravy, to its northwest.

Chez Boris WINE BAR
(20 rue de l'Aiguillerie; ♀Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) This friendly wine bar (tapas €4 to €11, mains €13 to €20), with its regularly changing dishes and wines to match, could just as easily feature as a recommended place to eat. Early evening punters slip in for an aperitif and perhaps a snack. Later, once diners have departed, Chez Boris is also a splendid spot for a last drink.

Café Latitude CAFÉ
(1 rue Ste-Croix; ♀7.30am-8pm Tue-Sat) Sink back into the comfiest of seats at this relaxed café with its faintly colonial decor and watch the little life that passes by on place Canourgue, one of Montpellier's most peaceful squares.

L'Heure Bleue TEA HOUSE
(1 rue de la Carbonnerie; ♀Tue-Sun) At this tea-room, sip an exotic blend to a background of classical music, enjoy a light lunch (around €15), with plenty of choice for vegetarians, or relax over an aperitif.

Le Huit MUSIC BAR
(04 67 66 14 18; 8 rue de l'Aiguillerie) Local bands play at this trendy hideout, where Wednesdays are for indie rock.

To find out what's on where, pick up the free weekly *Sortir à Montpellier*, available around town and at the tourist office. To tune into the active gay and lesbian scene, call by **Café de la Mer** (5 place du Marché aux Fleurs); the friendly staff will arm you with a map of gay venues.

L'Amigo, a night bus, does a circuit of Espace Latipolia and other dance venues on the periphery of town, leaving the train station at midnight and 1am, returning at 2.30am, 3.30am and (yawn!) 5am, Thursday to Saturday.

Opéra-Comédie BOX OFFICE
(☎04 67 60 19 80; place de la Comédie) Tickets for Montpellier's theatres are sold at the box office of the Opéra-Comédie.

Rockstore CLUB, DISCO
(☎04 67 06 80 00; www.rockstore.fr, in French; 20 rue de Verdun) In the heart of town, this long-standing discotheque and club is recognisable by the rear of a classic '70s Cadillac jutting out above the entrance. Opening days and times vary.

Espace Latipolia DISCOS
There's a critical mass of discos outside town in Espace Latipolia, about 10km from Montpellier on route de Palavas heading towards the coast. Major players include **La Nitro** (☎04 67 22 45 82; www.lanitro.com, in French), which thumps out techno and house, and **Le Matchico** (☎04 67 64 19 20; www.matchico.fr, in French), good for retro music.

Le Corum VENUE
(☎04 67 61 67 61; esplanade Charles de Gaulle) The city's prime concert venue.

Le Heaven GAY & LESBIAN
(1 rue Delpech) Just around the corner from Café de la Mer, this bar for gay guys and gals gets busy from 8pm.



Shopping

Le Bookshop BOOKSHOP
(www.lebookshop.com; 8 rue du Bras de Fer) As much social centre as bookshop, it carries a large stock of new and secondhand books in English and runs conversation exchanges and cultural events.

Les Cinq Continents TRAVEL BOOKSHOP
(20 rue Jacques Cœur) A specialist travel bookshop with an excellent selection of maps and travel literature.

Information

Dimension 4 Cybercafé (11 rue des Balances; per hr €3; ☎10am-midnight) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎04 67 60 60 60; www.ot-montpellier.fr; esplanade Charles de Gaulle; ☎9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun)

Getting There & Away

AIR Montpellier's **airport** (☎04 67 20 85 00; www.montpellier.aeroport.fr) is 8km southeast of town. EasyJet flies to/from London (Gatwick) and Ryanair to/from Leeds-Bradford.

BUS The **bus station** (☎04 67 92 01 43; rue du Grand St-Jean) is an easy walk from the train station. **Hérault Transport** (☎04 34 88 89 99; www.herault-transport.fr) runs buses approximately hourly to La Grande Motte (bus 106, €4, 35 minutes) via Carnon from Odysseum at the end of tram line 1. Up to four daily services continue to Aigues Mortes (€8.60, one hour).

Eurolines (☎08 92 89 90 91; 8 rue de Verdun) has buses to Barcelona (€18, five hours) and most European destinations.

TRAIN Destinations from Montpellier's two-storey train station include the following:

Carcassonne (€22.70, 1½ hours, up to 10 daily)

Millau (€26.10, 1¼ hours, three daily)

Narbonne (€14.80, one hour, frequent)

Nîmes (€8.60, 30 minutes, frequent)

Paris Gare de Lyon (€100 to €119.50, 3½ hours, at least 10 daily)

Perpignan (€23.10, 1¼ hours, frequent)

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT A frequent **shuttle bus** (☎08 25 34 01 34; €1.50; ☎every 15 min) runs between the airport and the place de l'Europe tram stop.

BICYCLE Montpellier is hugely bicycle-friendly. To rent a bike (per half-/full day €1/2), call by the tourist office or **VéloMagg** (27 rue Maguelone; ☎8am-8pm), which is handy for the train station, with your passport or ID card.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE The easiest and most ecofriendly option is to leave your vehicle in one of the vast car parks beside major tram stops such as Odysseum. Just €4 gets you all-day parking and return tram tickets to the heart of town for up to five people.

TAXI Ring **Taxis Bleu** (☎04 67 03 20 00) or **Taxis Tram** (☎04 67 58 10 10).

TRAM & BUS Savour Montpellier's high-tech, high-speed, leave-your-car-at-home trams. Like city buses, they're run by **TaM** (☎04 67 22 87 87; www.tam-way.com, in French).

Single-journey bus and tram tickets cost €1.40. A one-day pass/10-ticket *carnet* cost €3.40/11.50. Pick them up from newsagents or any tram station.

Around Montpellier

The closest beaches are at **Palavas-les-Flots**, 12km south of the city and a veritable Montpellier-on-Sea in summer. Take TaM bus 131 from the Port Marianne tram stop. Heading north on the coastal road towards Carnon, you stand a chance of seeing flamingos hovering the shallows of the lagoons either side of the D21.

Carnon itself comes out fairly low in the charm stakes despite its huge marina. Better to continue hugging the coast along the D59 (Le Petit Travers) alongside several kilometres of white-sand beach, uncrowded and without a kiosk or café in sight.

About 10km northeast of Carnon is **La Grande Motte**, purpose-built on a grand scale back in the 1960s to plug the tourist drain southwards into Spain. Its architecture, considered revolutionary at the time, now comes over as fairly heavy and leaden, contrasting with the more organic growth of adjacent **Grau du Roi**, deeper rooted and still an active fishing port.

Aigues-Mortes (p786), on the western edge of the Camargue, is another 11km eastwards.

Sète

POP 43,600

Sète is France's largest Mediterranean fishing port and biggest commercial entrepôt after Marseille. Established by Louis XIV in the 17th century, it prospered as the harbours of Aigues-Mortes and Narbonne, to north and south respectively, were cut off from the sea by silt deposits.

Huddled beneath Mont St-Clair, Sète has lots in its favour: waterways and canals, beaches, shoals of fish and seafood restaurants.



Sights & Activities

Musée International des Arts Modestes

QUIRKY MUSEUM

(MIAM; www.miam.org, in French; 23 quai Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny; adult/child €5/free; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, closed Tue Sep-Jun) Local artists Hervé di Rosa and Bernard Belluc have assembled an eccen-

tric, wholly delightful collection of simple, everyday objects, lots that will be familiar to any visitor, others more exotic.

Cimetière Marin

CEMETERY

Sète was the birthplace of the symbolist poet Paul Valéry (1871-1945), whose remains lie in this cemetery by the sea, the inspiration for his most famous poem. You'll understand why when you gaze at the view.

Espace Georges Brassens

MUSIC MUSEUM

(67 bd Camille Blanc; adult/child €5/free; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm Jun-Sep, closed Mon Oct-May) The town was the childhood home of singer and infinitely more accessible poet Georges Brassens (1921-81), whose mellow voice still speaks at this multimedia space.

Azur Croisières & Sète Croisières

BOAT TOURS

Between April and November boats of Azur Croisières and Sète Croisières nudge into the canals, port and inland Bassin de Thau, leaving from Pont de la Savonnerie. Both also do half-day **fishing trips** in July and August.



Festivals & Events

Fête de la St-Pierre

TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL

Over a long weekend in the first half of July. Also called Fête des Pêcheurs (Fisherfolks' Festival).

Fête de la St-Louis

TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL

Six frantic days around 25 August with *joutes nautiques*, where participants in competing boats try to topple each other into the water.



Sleeping & Eating

Tempting fish restaurants line quai Durand and quai Maximin Licciardi all the way from Pont de la Savonnerie to the wholesale fish market.

Auberge de Jeunesse

YOUTH HOSTEL €

(☎04 67 53 46 68; sete@fuaj.org; rue Général Revest; incl breakfast €17.20, d €38.50; ☀Feb-mid-Dec) Scarcely 1km northwest of the tourist office, it enjoys a lovely wooded site with great views over town and harbour.

L'Orque Bleue

QUAYSIDE HOTEL €€

(☎04 67 74 72 13; www.hotel-orquebleue-sete.com; 10 quai Aspirant Herber; r interior €89-93, canalside €115-125; ☀closed Jan; 🚿🚿) Right on the quayside and prominent among its dowdier neighbours, this hotel occupies a former shipping magnate's mansion, clad

throughout in marble. To truly sense Sète as a living port, go for one of the more expensive nine rooms overlooking the canal, unless you're a light sleeper.

TOP CHOICE **La Péniche** FLOATING RESTAURANT €€ (☎04 67 48 64 13; 1 quai des Moulins; mains €13-15, menus €10-22; ☹Mon-Fri, dinner Sat & lunch Sun) The service is brisk and friendly and the clientele a mix of local workers, suits and sweaters on this converted barge. For the *menu du matelot* (sailor's menu; €15), two pots of pâté, into which you dig at will, are slapped before you, followed by a significant dollop of Russian salad and half a lettuce. For the main course, it has to be the house speciality, *rouille sétoise* – whole baby octopuses smothered in a peppery *rouille* sauce (mayonnaise of olive oil, garlic and chilli peppers). Then comes dessert...

Les Demoiselles Dupuy SEAFOOD €€ (☎04 67 74 03 46; 4 quai Maximin Licciardi; mains €10-18.50; ☹Thu-Tue) This tiny place, crowded and rough and ready, serves up the freshest of seafood at economical prices in unpretentious surroundings. The oysters, shucked before you, come straight from Les Demoiselles Dupuy's own offshore beds.

i Information

The **tourist office** (☎04 99 04 71 71; www.tourisme-sete.com; 60 Grand' Rue Mario Roustan; ☹9.30am-6pm, to 7.30pm Jul & Aug) rents out **audioguides** (per route €5) covering six walks (two with English commentary) in and around town.

Agde

POP 21,600

There are really three Agdes: old Agde, the original settlement beside the River Hérault; Grau d'Agde, a small, modern fishing port; and Le Cap d'Agde, a vast summertime playground, famed for its long beaches and large nudist colony.

Of these, old Agde, originally a Phoenician then a Greek settlement, is significantly the most interesting. It's named after Agatha Tyche, the Greek goddess, and its inhabitants are still called Agathois.

The dark grey basalt of its imposing **hotels particulier** (private mansions) and the fortresslike, mainly 12th-century **Cathédrale St-Étienne** motivated Marco Polo to describe the town as the 'black pearl of the Mediterranean'.

Musée Agathois (5 rue de la Fraternité; adult/child €4.70/1.80; ☹9.30am-6.30pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm, Wed-Mon Sep-Jun), within an attractive 17th-century mansion, is a wonderful cornucopia of local treasures, including rooms furnished in period style with mannequins in period dress, a couple of kitchens, model boats, stuffed birds, swords and sextants, ex-votos, an unparalleled collection of bedpans and so much more.

Once a convent then a coaching inn, **Hôtel le Donjon** (☎04 67 94 12 32; www.hotel-agde.com; place Jean Jaurès; r €55-74; ☹) is full of character and decidedly on the up. The dynamic new owner, a dab hand at DIY, has himself undertaken long-needed renovations. While the furniture, though smart, speaks of the mid-20th century, rooms are spruce and freshly painted.

TOP CHOICE **Lou Pescadou** (☎04 67 21 17 10; 18 rue Chassefière; menu €15) has been serving the same take-it-or-leave-it five-course *menu* since 1965. First, a rich, fishy broth. After a steaming plate of mussels, piled high, comes a big bowl of pâté. Then it's a giant grilled fish or slab of steak followed by an equally gut-busting dessert. Come back tomorrow, next week, next year and repeat the experience; Lou Pescadou is one of life's few constants.

Plenty of fish restaurants with terraces and pontoons splay along the quayside.

Agde's **tourist office** (☎04 67 62 91 99; www.capdagde.com; ☹10am-noon & 2-6pm daily Jul & Aug, Tue-Sat Sep-Jun) is on rue Jean Roger. Ask for *Capital City*, the walking-tour leaflet in English. The office sells tickets for three companies that run short and very agreeable **boat trips** along the **Canal du Midi**, which joins the River Hérault just upstream from old Agde.

Buses run at least hourly along the 6km route to the modern tourist resort of Le Cap d'Agde.

Béziers

POP 74,200

Béziers, first settled by the Phoenicians, became an important military post in Roman times. It was almost completely destroyed in 1209 during the Albigensian Crusade, when some 20,000 'heretics', many seeking refuge in the cathedral, were slaughtered. In happier times, the local tax collector Paul Riquet (1604-80) directed the digging

of the Unesco World Heritage Site **Canal du Midi**, a 240km-long marvel of engineering (see p689) that runs from Toulouse to Sète. There's a fine statue to Béziers' most famous son on allées Paul Riquet, a wide, leafy esplanade at the heart of the town that's enlivened by a splendid **flower market** every Friday.

Fortified **Cathédrale St-Nazaire** (☉9am-noon & 2.30-5.30pm), surrounded by narrow alleys, is typical of the area, with massive towers, an imposing facade and a huge 14th-century rose window.

Musée du Biterrois (place des Casernes; adult/child €2.80/1.40; ☉9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) is a well-lit, well-organised museum of the town's history, its largest sections devoted to Roman artefacts and wine-making.

Pont-Canal, an easy walk from the heart of Béziers, is a grand aqueduct, slung across the shallow valley of the river Orb in the mid-19th century to iron out a kink in the Canal du Midi. Just upstream, at **Écluses de Fontseranes**, a tight stepladder of nine locks, you can hire **bikes** and electric **boats**.

Popular annual events include the week-long **Festa d'Oc**, a celebration of Mediterranean music and dance in late July; and the **féria**, a five-day celebration with bullfights, when the town becomes more Spanish than Languedocien, held around 15 August.



Hôtel des Poètes (☎04 67 76 38 66; www.hoteldespoetes.net;

80 allées Paul Riquet; s/d from €45/55; ☉) is a spruce, delightfully quiet, 14-room hotel with fresh flowers, gay floral pattern bed-heads and stylish furnishings – the feminine touch is everywhere. The two friendly owners speak excellent English, will collect your car from the nearby private garage, lend a bike for free and even reserve you a restaurant table.



Octopus (☎04 67 49 90 00; www.restaurant-octopus.com, in French;

12 rue Boïeldieu; mains €26-28, menus €29-75; ☉Tue-Sat) is a tasteful venue where each tempting dish is a work of visual as well as gastronomic art. The lunchtime deal (starter, main, coffee and wine for €21 – or €29 if you can squeeze in a dessert) is superb value.

Béziers' **tourist office** (☎04 67 76 84 00; www.beziers-tourisme.fr; 29 av St-Saëns; ☉9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat) is in the Palais des Congrès.

Narbonne

POP 52,500

Once a coastal port but now a whole 13km inland because of silting up, Narbonne in its time was capital of Gallia Narbonensis and one of the principal Roman cities in Gaul.

The splendid **Cathédrale St-Just** (entry on rue Armand Gauthier; ☉9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm) is, in fact, no more than its towers and a soaring choir; construction having stopped in the early 14th century. The ambulatory chapel directly behind the main altar has a haunting alabaster *Virgin and Child* and fine, much knocked-about polychrome stone carving. Its **treasury** (admission €2.20; ☉11am-6pm Jul-Sep, 2-5pm Oct-Jun) has a beautiful Flemish tapestry of the Creation, while grotesque gargoyles leer down upon the 16th-century **cloister**.

The elaborate mock-Renaissance 19th-century facade of the **Hôtel de Ville** (place de la Hôtel de Ville) was designed by Viollet-le-Duc.

Facing the same square (below which you can see a stretch of the Via Domitia Roman highway), the fortified **Palais des Archevêques** (Archbishops' Palace; ☉9.30am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Apr-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) houses Narbonne's **Musée d'Art et d'Histoire** and **Musée Archéologique**, the latter with an impressive collection of Roman mosaics and paintings on stucco. Nearby are the **Horreum**, an underground gallery of Gallo-Roman shops and the **Musée Lapidaire**, notable for its catchy 30-minute **sound-and-light show** (every hour on the hour) projected onto walls, ceiling and vast hunks of original Roman masonry. Opening hours for the above sites are the same as Palais des Archevêques.

Also take in **Les Halles** (☉Mon-Sat), Narbonne's imposing art nouveau covered market, a colourful place to stock up on food and itself an architectural jewel.



COMBINATION TICKET

Unless you're planning to visit only one site in Narbonne, it's cheaper to invest in a **four-museum pass** (€5.20), valid for three days, covering entry to Palais des Archevêques, Musée Archéologique, the Horreum and Musée Lapidaire.

Just off the A9, 15km south of Narbonne, is the **Réserve Africaine de Sigean** (www.reserveafricainesigean.fr; adult/child €26/20; ☉9am-6.30pm), where lions, tigers and other 'safari' animals live in semi-liberty. If you arrive by bike or on foot, there's free transport around the reserve.

Narbonne's **tourist office** (☎04 68 65 15 60; www.narbonne-tourisme.com; 31 rue Jean Jaurès; ☉9am-7pm Apr-mid-Sep, closed Sun afternoons mid-Sep-Mar) occupies smart premises beside Canal de la Robine.

Carcassonne

POP 49,100

From afar, Carcassonne looks like some fairy-tale medieval city. Bathed in late-afternoon sunshine and highlighted by dark clouds, La Cité, as the old walled city is known, is truly breathtaking. But once you're inside, La Cité loses its magic and mystery. Luring almost four million visitors annually, it can be a tourist hell in high summer. This said, you'll have to be fairly stone-hearted not to be moved.

But Carcassonne is more than La Cité. The Ville Basse (Lower Town), altogether more tranquil and established in the 13th century, is a more modest stepsister to camp Cinderella up the hill and also merits more than a browse.

The hill on which La Cité stands has been fortified across the centuries – by Gauls, Romans, Visigoths, Moors and Franks. In the 13th century, the walls protected one of the major Cathar strongholds (see boxed text, p748). Once Roussillon was annexed to France in 1659, Carcassonne, no longer a frontier town, sank into slow decline. By the 19th century La Cité was simply crumbling away. It was rescued by the elaborate intervention of Viollet-le-Duc, who also set his controversial stamp upon, for example, the cathedrals of Notre Dame in Paris and Vézelay in Burgundy.

👁 Sights & Activities

La Cité

WALLED CITY

La Cité (Map p730), dramatically illuminated at night, is enclosed by two rampart walls and punctuated by 52 stone towers. But only the lower sections of the walls are original; the rest, including the anachronistic witch-hat roofs (the originals were altogether flatter and weren't covered with slate), were stuck on by Viollet-le-Duc in the 19th century.

If you enter via the main entrance, before you rears a massive bastion, the **Porte Narbonnaise** and, just inside, the tourist office annexe. Rue Cros Mayrevieille, suffocating in kitschy souvenir shops, leads up to place du Château, heart of La Cité.

Through another archway and across a second dry moat is the 12th-century **Château Comtal** (adult/child €8.50/free; ☉10am-6.30pm). The entrance fee lets you look around the castle itself, enjoy an 11-minute film and join an optional 30- to 40-minute guided tour of the ramparts (tours in English, July and August). Descriptive panels around the castle, in both French and English, are explicit. For more detail, invest in an **audioguide** (1/2 people €4/6).

South of place du Château is **Basilique St-Nazaire** (☉9am-11.45am & 1.45-5pm or 5.30pm). Highlights are the graceful Gothic transept arms with a pair of superb 13th- and 14th-century rose windows at each end.

The **Petit Train de la Cité** (adult/child €7/3; ☉May-Sep), with multilingual commentary, beats the bounds of the ramparts. Alternatively, a **horse-drawn carriage** (www.carcassonne-caleches.com; adult/child €7/4; ☉Jul, Aug & school holidays), hauled by a pair of magnificent dray horses, does a similar 20-minute trip.

Canal du Midi

BOAT RIDES

(Map p728) **Lou Gabaret**, **L'Hélios** and **Solal** (adult €8-10.50, child €6.50-7.50; ☉Apr-Oct) chug along the Canal du Midi, departing from the bridge beside the train station. Sailings with commentary last from 1¼ to 2½ hours and prices vary accordingly.

Génération VTT

CYCLING

(Map p728; ☎06 09 59 30 85; www.generation-vtt.com/carcassonne, in French; ☉9am-1pm & 2-7pm Apr-Oct) Here, beside the Canal du Midi, you can rent a bike (per two hours/half/full day €10/12/18) for a spin along its banks or around town. The young team also lead two- and three-hour cultural and gastronomic **cycle tours** (per 2/3 hours €20/30).



Festivals & Events

Embrassement de la Cité

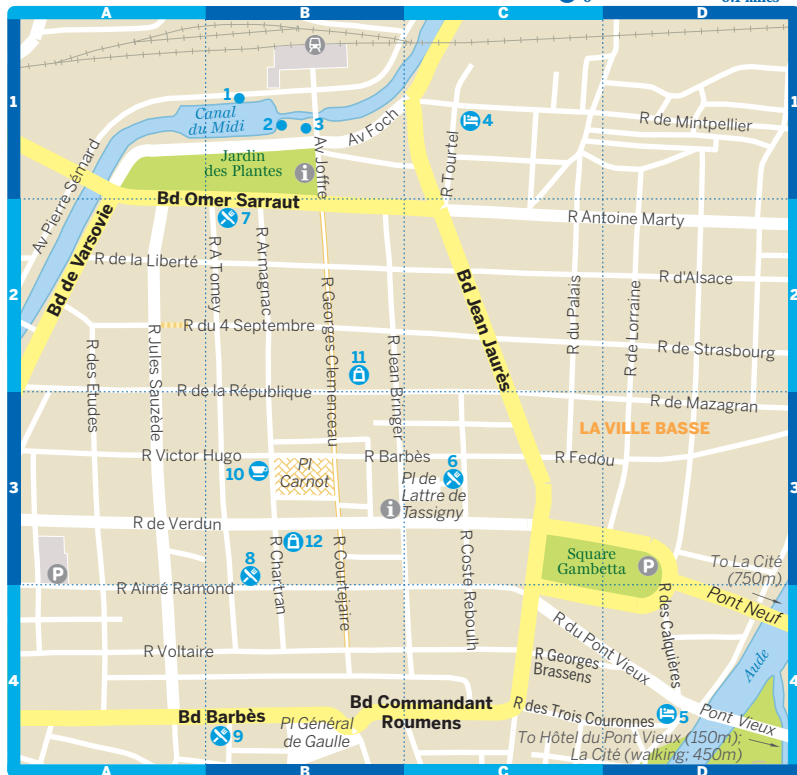
BASTILLE DAY

(Setting La Cité Ablaze) Carcassonne knows how to party. On 14 July at 10.30pm, it celebrates Bastille Day with a fireworks display rivalled only by Paris' pyrotechnics.

Festival de Carcassonne

CULTURAL FESTIVAL

(www.festivaldecarcassonne.fr) Brings music, dance and theatre to town for three weeks in July. Of the more than 100



spectacles, around 70 are free and enliven Carcassonne's squares and public spaces.



Sleeping

Chambres d'Hôte Nicole Cordonnier

B&B €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 25 16 67; <http://legrandpuits.free.fr>, in French; 8 place du Grand Puits; d incl breakfast €50-70) In the heart of La Cité, two of Madame Cordonnier's warmly recommended three rooms are particularly large, have a kitchenette for self-caterers, private terrace and can accommodate up to six (€10 per extra person).

Sidsmums

B&B €

(☎04 68 26 94 49; www.sidsmums.com; 11 chemin de la Croix d'Achille; dm €21.50, d with corridor bathroom €42-48) In Preixan, 10km south of Carcassonne, this is a splendid budget option. You can hire a bike, take a guided walk with Georges and Jim, the dogs, and cook for yourself in the self-contained kitchen. In

the garden are four chalets (€46 to €51.50), each sleeping up to four. Take the Quillan bus (four daily).

Hôtel Le Donjon

HOTEL €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 11 23 00; www.hotel-donjon.fr; 2 rue du Comte Roger; d €105-153; ⓂⓈⓉ) Low-beamed, thick-walled, venerable and cosy, 15th-century Le Donjon was originally an orphanage. Rooms overlook either its shady garden or the ramparts. Of its two equally comfortable annexes, Les Remparts is more contemporary, if shorter on period charm, while Maison du Comte Roger, with its striking medieval staircase, has superior standard rooms.

Hôtel du Pont Vieux

HOTEL €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 25 24 99; www.lacitedecarcassonne.fr; 32 rue Trivalle; r €56-90; ⓂⓈⓉ) Bedrooms, most with a bathtub, have attractively rough-hewn walls. On the 3rd floor, rooms 18 and 19 have unsurpassed

Carcassonne

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Canal du Midi Boat Rides..... B1
- 2 Canal du Midi Boat Rides..... B1
- 3 Génération VTT B1

Sleeping

- 4 Hôtel Astoria..... C1
- 5 Hôtel des Trois Couronnes..... D4

Eating

- 6 Cantine Robert Rodriguez C3
- 7 Chez Fred B2
- 8 Covered Market B3
- 9 L'Écurie..... B4
- Restaurant des Trois Couronnes (see 5)

Drinking

- 10 La Cité des Arômes B3

Shopping

- 11 Esprit de Sel B2
- 12 La Ferme B3

views of the Cité. The buffet breakfast (€7) is truly gargantuan, and there's a large garden with olive and fig trees and flowering shrubs.

Hôtel de la Cité

HOTEL €€€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 71 98 71; www.hoteldelacite.orient-express.com; place Auguste Pont; r from €425;   ) Neo-Gothic Hôtel de la Cité has rooms fit for royalty (literally so: 'A favourite hideaway for Europe's crowned heads, film stars, writers and intellectuals', proclaims its glossy brochure), should you fancy a retreat in such august company.




Hôtel des Trois Couronnes

HOTEL €€

(Map p728; ☎04 68 25 36 10; www.hotel-destrois-couronnes.com; 2 rue des Trois Couronnes; r from €90;   ) Both rooms and reception area have been recently renovated at this attractive modern hotel beside the River Aude. There are uninterrupted views of La Cité from east-facing rooms (€20 extra). Up on the 4th floor, there's a heated indoor pool and a particularly good **restaurant**.

Hôtel Astoria

HOTEL €

(Map p728; ☎04 68 25 31 38; www.astoria-carcassonne.com, in French; 18 rue Tourtel; d/tr/q €52/64/79, r with shared bathroom €34;  Feb;  ) Rooms (a few have air-con) are fresh and pleasant at this hotel and its equally agreeable annexe. Bathrooms are a bit poky but all in all it's a welcom-

ing place that offers very good value. Free parking.



Auberge de Jeunesse

YOUTH HOSTEL €

(Map p730; ☎04 68 25 23 16; carcassonne@fuaj.org; rue Vicomte Trencavel; incl breakfast €20.80;  Feb–mid-Dec;  ) Carcassonne's cheery HI-affiliated youth hostel, in the heart of La Cité, has rooms sleeping four to six. It has a members' kitchen, a summertime snack bar, great outside terrace and an internet station. It rents out bikes (€10 per day) to hostellers. Although it has 120 beds, it's smart to reserve year-round.

Camping de la Cité

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 68 25 11 77; www.campeole.com; sites €16-28.40;  mid-Mar–mid-Oct; ) A walking and cycling trail leads from this site to both La Cité and the Ville Basse. From mid-June to mid-September, a shuttle bus connects the campsite with La Cité and the train station every 20 minutes.



Eating

Even if it's a boiling summer's day, don't leave town without trying *cassoulet*, a piping-hot dish blending white beans, juicy pork cubes, even bigger cylinders of meaty sausage and, in the most popular local variant, a hunk of duck.

VILLE BASSE



Cantine Robert Rodriguez

RETRO RESTAURANT €€

(Map p728; ☎04 68 47 37 80; www.restaurant-robertrodriguez.com; 39 rue Coste Reboulh; mains around €25;  closed Wed dinner & Sun; ) Chef Robert Rodriguez works with exclusively organic raw materials and considers himself as much artisan as chef. *Fraicheur, saison, tradition, créativité* (fresh, seasonal, traditional and creative) is the leitmotif at his *cantine*. It's all consciously retro with marble-topped tables, bentwood chairs and early Edith Piaf and Charles Trenet warbling in the background. Walls are bedecked with his many diplomas and awards, plus photos of your heavily moustachioed host with famous guests.

Restaurant des Trois Couronnes

RESTAURANT €€

(Map p728; ☎04 68 25 36 10; mains €15-16, menu €21;  Tue-Sat) This fine restaurant, on the 4th floor of Hôtel des Trois Couronnes, offers great cuisine with a magnificent panorama of La Cité thrown in.

L'Écurie

(Map p728; ☎04 68 72 04 04; www.restaurant-lecurie.fr; 43 bd Barbès; mains €12-23, lunch menu €15, menus €24.50-34; ☺Mon-Sat & lunch Sun) Enjoy fine fare either within this attractively renovated 18th-century stable, all polished woodwork, brass and leather, or in the large, shaded garden. Pick from its long and choice selection of local wines.

Chez Fred

(Map p728; ☎04 68 72 02 23; www.chez-fred.fr; 31 bd Omer Sarraut; menus €25-30; ☺lunch Tue-Fri & dinner daily) With a large window

RESTAURANT €€

RESTAURANT €€

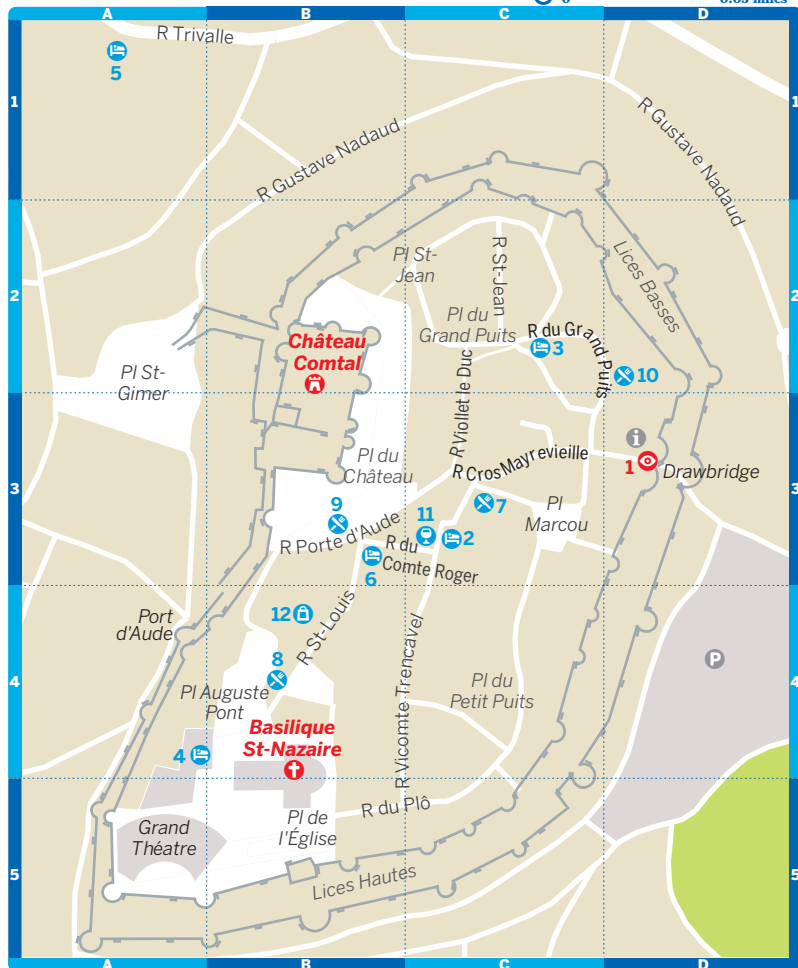
pierced in one of the walls of the ox-blood-red interior, you can peek at what Fred's chefs are rustling up; it's sure to be something creative. Alternatively, dine on its shaded tunnel of a terrace. The weekday *menu bistro* (lunch €17, dinner €21) is superb value.

LA CITÉ

Place Marcou is hemmed in on three sides by eateries. Indeed, throughout La Cité every second building seems to be a café or restaurant. It's wise to reserve, particularly for lunch.

Carcassonne – La Cité

0 100 m
0 0.05 miles



Linger after the crowds have left. Then, La Cité belongs only to its 100 or so inhabitants and the few visitors staying at hotels within its ramparts.

Chez Saskia

BRASSERIE €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 71 98 71; place Auguste Pont; mains €18-23, menus €23-45; ☺Mar-Jan) This brasserie, which offers tasty, great-value dishes and a particularly rich range of desserts, belongs to Hôtel de la Cité. All around its walls are photos of the great and good who have stayed at the hotel: Jacques Chirac, Winston Churchill, Yves Montand and many more, recognisable and less so.

Auberge de Dame Carcas

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 71 23 23; 3 place du Château; mains €12-15, menus €15-26; ☺Thu-Tue) This casual restaurant specialises in suckling pig (spot the model porkers all around) and carries a fine selection of well-priced local wines (including a delightfully smooth house red at €11). The ground floor is cosy and agreeably rustic, and you can see the chefs at work. The larger upstairs room offers more light, and there's a summer terrace too.

L'Écu d'Or

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(Map p730; ☎04 68 25 49 03; 7-9 rue Porte d'Aude; mains €14-20, lunch menu €18, menus €25-33) Step down to semi-basement level to dine in style within the thick stone walls of this friendly spot. It serves, among many other delightful dishes, five varieties of *cassoulet* and a delicious range of creative desserts.

Auberge des Musées

RESTAURANT €€

(Map p730; ☎06 17 05 24 90; 17 rue du Grand Puits; menus €14.50-28) This unpretentious place has three rear terraces with views of the ramparts. It bakes its own organic bread and offers excellent-value meals. It doesn't take credit cards.

Self-Catering

Try the **covered market** (Map p728; rue Aimé Ramond; ☺Mon-Sat) or the **open-air market** (Map p728; place Carnot; ☺Tue, Thu & Sat). See also Shopping.



Drinking

Cafés overlooking place Carnot in the Ville Basse spill onto the square in summer. In La Cité, place Marcou is one big outside café.



Comptoir des Vins et Terroirs

WINE BAR

(Map p730; 3 rue du Comte Roger; dishes €6.50-15; ☺Easter-mid-October) Run by a couple of qualified sommeliers, this wine bar carries a carefully selected range of mainly Languedoc-Roussillon wines, mostly from small-scale producers and many available by the glass. Indulge in their sampling of three wines, described to you in excellent English, and nibble at their cheese and charcuterie snacks, also predominantly local.

La Cité des Arômes

CAFÉ

(Map p728; 14 place Carnot) In the northwestern corner of place Carnot, this café wafts out scents of rich arabica and carries a huge selection of coffees.



Shopping

La Ferme

GOURMET FOOD

(Map p728; 26 rue Chartran) A particularly well-stocked delicatessen, piled high with

La Cité

Top Sights

- Basilique St-Nazaire B4
Château Comtal B2

Sights

- 1 Porte Narbonnaise D3

Sleeping

- 2 Auberge de Jeunesse C3
3 Chambres d'Hôte Nicole
Cordonnier C2
4 Hôtel de la Cité A4
5 Hôtel du Pont Vieux A1

- 6 Hôtel Le Donjon B3

Eating

- 7 Auberge de Dame Carcas C3
8 Chez Saskia B4
9 L'Écu d'Or B3
10 Auberge des Musées D2

Drinking

- 11 Comptoir des Vins et Terroirs C3

Shopping

- 12 L'Art Gourmand B4

vintage cheeses, wines, sausages and lots of other *gourmandises*, including homemade crème Chantilly.

Esprit de Sel

BRIC-A-BRAC

(Map p728; 10 rue de la République; ☺Tue-Sat) This wonderful emporium is a place to browse and squeal with pleasure as you discover some unexpected treasure that you never knew you wanted or needed until now. Jocelyne Feller has an eye for quirky, off-centre items, ranging from the seriously retro to up-to-the-minute contemporary. Penetrate deep into the three galleries to explore the wares, culled from suppliers both large and small, and local producers – umbrellas, suitcases, boots, soaps and lotions, ornaments large to tiny, lampstands, ceramics, clothing and much more.

L'Art Gourmand

CHOCOLATE

(Map p730; 13 rue St-Louis) Chocolate fiends should definitely descend upon this place, which sells a huge range of goodies. The ice cream is pretty great too – all 31 varieties of it.

i Information

Alerte Rouge (73 rue de Verdun; per hr €3; ☺9.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Buy a drink and you can wi-fi for free for an hour. And here's a rare internet café that actually does great coffee.

Main tourist office (☎04 68 10 24 30; www.carcassonne-tourisme.com; 28 rue de Verdun; ☺9am-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon or 1pm Sun) Borrow an **audioguide** to the Ville Basse (€3 for two hours).

Tourist office annexes La Cité (Porte Narbonne; ☺year-round); Ville Basse (av Joffre; ☺mid-Apr-Oct)

i Getting There & Away

AIR Ryanair is the only airline to fly in and out of Carcassonne's **airport** (☎04 68 71 96 46),

5.5km from town. It serves several UK destinations, plus Cork and Dublin in Ireland.

TRAIN Carcassonne is on the busy main line linking Toulouse (€14, 50 minutes) with Narbonne (€9.80, 30 minutes) and Montpellier (€22.70, 1½ hours). For Perpignan (€18.30, 1½ hours), change in Narbonne.

i Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT The Navette

Aéroport runs to and from the airport (€5, 25 minutes), leaving the train station approximately two hours before each Ryanair departure. By car, take the Carcassonne Ouest A61 motorway exit.

BICYCLE Génération VTT (see Sights & Activities) rents both touring and mountain bikes, plus child seats and trailers.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE For La Cité, leave your vehicle in the huge car park (€5 for up to five hours) just east of the main entrance.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT Buses run only until about 7pm, Monday to Saturday.

Bus 4 runs roughly every 45 minutes from the train station and Ville Basse to La Cité's main entrance.

Between July and September, a dinky **motorised train** (single/return €2/3; ☺10am-12.45pm & 2.15-7.30pm Mon-Sat) links La Cité, the town centre and train station every 20 minutes via Pont Vieux.

TAXI Call ☎04 68 71 50 50 for a taxi.

HAUT-LANGUEDOC

Haut-Languedoc is a world away from the towns, vineyards and beaches of the broad coastal plain. More sparsely populated, it's a land of deeply incised gorges, high wind-swept plateaux and dense forest, ideal for those who love being out in the open air.

Mende

POP 13,200

Mende, a quiet little place straddling the River Lot, is the capital of Lozère, France's least populous *département*. Its oval-shaped centre is ringed by a one-way road that acts as something of a *cordon sanitaire*, leaving the old quarter almost traffic-free.

👁 Sights & Activities

The tourist office's brochure, *Listen to the Story of Mende*, highlights the town's main historical features.



APPROACHING LA CITÉ

When approaching La Cité you could, like most visitors, leave your vehicle in one of the vast car parks beside the main entrance. But for a wonderful perspective of the ramparts, growing larger as you ascend, approach La Cité from the Ville Basse, on foot. Cross narrow Pont Vieux, walk along rue de la Barbacane, then up and in through Porte d'Aude.

Cathédrale Notre Dame

CATHEDRAL

(place Urbain V) The dark interior of the 14th-century, twin-towered cathedral makes the pincushion panes of the 17th-century rose window at the west end positively glow. But you'll have to peer hard to make out detail on the eight 18th-century Aubusson tapestries, hung high above the nave, that illustrate the life of the Virgin.

Mimat Adventures

ADVENTURE PARK

(☎04 66 45 00 24; adult/child €19/16; ☀9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug, 2-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Jun & Sep) High upon Causse de Mende, which looms above town to the south, this treetop adventure park has 76 different aerial activities for all ages. You can also rent mountain bikes here and take off along the heights.



Sleeping & Eating



Hôtel de France

HOTEL €€

(☎04 66 65 00 04; www.hoteldefrance-mende.com, in French; 9 bd Lucien Arnault; d €58-95; ☎@f) Most rooms at this one-time coaching inn (whose owner speaks excellent English) have sweeping views over the valley and gardens below. All 19 rooms are particularly large, with separate toilet and gleaming bathroom. For families, there are two duplexes (€98) and a pair of rooms with small roof terrace (also €98). On the inner ring road, it runs a first-class **restaurant** (menus €28 to €32).

Hôtel le Commerce

HOTEL €

(☎04 66 65 13 73; www.lecommerce-mende.com; 2 bd Henri Bourrillon; s/d €43/53; ☎) Opposite place du Foirail on the busy ring road, this agreeably labyrinthine hotel, run by the same family for three generations, has 10 impeccable rooms. The owner is an ale fanatic and his popular bar carries a great range of beers.

Restaurant Les Voûtes

GRILLS, PIZZAS €€

(☎04 66 49 00 05; 13 rue d'Aigues-Passes; menus €25; ☀Mon-Sat) The Vaults enjoys a splendid setting, deep within an ex-convent. Run by three brothers, it offers salads big enough to fill a fruit bowl, plus pizzas and grills. It also does great all-on-one-plate lunchtime specials (€13.50).

Le Mazel

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎04 66 65 05 33; 25 rue du Collège; mains €19-26, lunch menu €16; ☀closed Wed & dinner Sun) This restaurant with its stylish decor offers mainly local cuisine, imaginatively prepared (start, for example, with the *pigeon ramier crème de foie gras*, wood pigeon

with cream of foie gras). A recognised gourmet venue, it provides exceptional value.

Self-Catering

Saturday is market day, when a farmers market takes over place Urbain V. **La Fromagerie** (30bis rue Soubeyran), overlooked by the buttresses of the cathedral's east end, has an impressive range of cheeses, regional meats and pâtés.

i Information

Tourist office (☎04 66 94 00 23; www.ot-mende.fr; place du Foirail; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, also open Sun Jul & Aug; ☎) Free wi-fi, which extends to the café terrace nearby.

i Getting There & Away

BUS Buses leave from the train station, most passing by place du Foirail, beside the tourist office. On weekdays, there's one bus daily to Le Puy-en-Velay (€26, two hours). Two SNCF buses run daily to/from Clermont-Ferrand in the Massif Central (€31, three hours).

TRAIN The train station is 1km north of town across the River Lot. There are two trains daily to Alès (€17.20, 2½ hours).

Around Mende

Parc du Gévaudan

WOLF PARK

(www.loupsdugévaudan.com, in French; adult/child €7/4; ☀10am-6pm or 7pm) Wolves once prowled freely through the Lozère forests but today you'll see them only in this sanctuary, in Ste-Lucie, 7km north of Marvejols. The park sustains around 100 Mongolian, Canadian, Siberian and Polish wolves living in semi-freedom.

Réserve de Bisons d'Europe

BISON PARK

(☎04 66 31 40 40; www.bisoneurope.com, in French; ☀10am-5pm or 6pm) Near the small village of Ste-Eulalie-en-Margeride, around 40 bison roam freely. Visitors, on the other hand, must follow a 50-minute guided tour, either by horse-drawn carriage (per adult/child €12.50/7) or, in winter, by sledge (€14.50/8). From mid-June to September, you can follow a self-guided 1km walking path (per adult/child €6/4) around the periphery.

Parc National des Cévennes

Drier, hotter and in general leafier than the Auvergne to their north, the Cévennes have more in common with Mediterranean

lands. Dotted with isolated hamlets, they harbour a huge diversity of fauna and flora (an astounding 2250 plant species have been logged). Creatures such as red deer, beavers and vultures, long gone from these lands, have been successfully reintroduced. The park covers four main areas: Mont Lozère, much of the Causse Méjean, the Vallées Cévenoles (Cévennes Valleys) and Mont Aigoual.

The best map of the park is the IGN's *Parc National des Cévennes* (€6.20) at 1:100,000.

History

The 910-sq-km park was created in 1970 to bring ecological stability to an area that, because of religious and later economic upheavals, has long had a destabilising human presence. Population influxes, which saw the destruction of forests for logging and pasture, were followed by mass desertions as people gave up the fight against the inhospitable climate and terrain. Emigration led to the abandonment of hamlets and farms, many of which have been snapped up by wealthy Parisians and foreigners.



Sights

MONT LOZÈRE

This 1699m-high lump of granite in the north of the park is shrouded in cloud and ice in winter and covered with heather and blueberries, peat bogs and flowing streams in summer. The **Musée du Mont Lozère** (adult/child incl audioguide €3.50/2.50; ☎2.30-6.30pm Apr-Oct, also 10.30am-12.30pm Jun-Sep), within a hideous concrete hulk at Pont de Montvert, 20km northeast of Florac, is a fascinating introduction to the region and its traditional rural crafts. Alas, the English audio commentary is a disaster; you're better off reading the French text.

VALLÉES CÉVENOLES

First planted in the Middle Ages, *châtaigniers* (sweet-chestnut trees) carpet the Vallées Cévenoles, the park's central area of plunging ravines and jagged ridges. Along one of these ridges runs the breathtaking Corniche des Cévennes, linking St-Jean du Gard and Florac.

MONT AIGOUAL

Mont Aigoual (1567m) and neighbouring Montagne du Lingas are renowned for their searing winds and heavy snowfall. The area is dense with beech trees, thanks to a refor-

estation program that counteracts years of uncontrolled logging. The observatory atop the summit has an **exhibition** (www.aigoual.asso.fr; admission free; ☎10am-1pm & 2-6pm May-Sep), where you can learn about weather prediction (and even take part in preparing the next day's forecast), cloud formation and lots more. Captions are in French but much of the exhibition is highly visual.



Activities

In winter there's **cross-country skiing** (more than 100km of marked trails) on Mont Aigoual and Mont Lozère, while **donkey treks** are popular in the park in warmer months. There are 600km of donkey- and horse-riding trails and 200km marked out for mountain-bike enthusiasts.

An equally well-developed network of trails makes the park a walking paradise year-round. It's criss-crossed by a dozen GR (*grande randonnée*; hiking) trails and there are over 20 shorter signposted walks lasting between two and seven hours.



Getting There & Away

By car, the most spectacular route from the east is the Corniche des Cévennes, a ridge road that winds along the mountain crests of the Cévennes for 56km from St-Jean du Gard to Florac.

If you're approaching Florac from Mende and the north, leave the N106 (itself a scenic run) at Balsièges and drive the much quieter, even prettier D31. This crosses the wild, upland Causse de Sauveterre, then descends to Ispagnac, where you turn left to rejoin the main N106.

Florac

POP 2000

Florac, 79km northwest of Alès and 38km southeast of Mende, makes a great base for exploring the Parc National des Cévennes and the upper reaches of the Gorges du Tarn. Lively in summer and moribund for most of the rest of the year, it's draped along the west bank of River Tarnon, one of the tributaries of the Tarn, while the sheer cliffs of the Causse Méjean loom 1000m overhead.



Activities

The tourist office's *Guide Touristique* has page upon page detailing a whole summer's worth of outdoor activities, from short walks to caving and paragliding.

Walking

For detailed information on the park's rich walking potential, contact **Maison du Parc National des Cévennes** (☎04 66 49 53 01; www.cevennes-parcnational.fr, in French; ☉9am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.15pm & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr). It occupies the handsome, restored 17th-century Château de Florac. Resources include a dozen excellent information kits (€5 each) describing circular walks from various starting points within the park and also an English version of its guidebook *Parc National des Cévennes* (€15). There's a splendidly informative **interactive exhibition** (admission free), *Passagers du Paysage*, with captions, a recorded commentary in English (delivered, alas, by a couple of glum, monotone native speakers) and a 15-minute slide show. Ask about **Festival Nature**, the park's summertime mix of outdoor activities, lectures and field trips.

Donkey Treks

Why not follow the lead of Robert Louis Stevenson and hire a pack animal? Several companies around Florac are in the donkey business. They include **Gentiâne** (☎04 66 41 04 16; <http://anegenti.free.fr>) in Castagnols and **Tramontane** (☎04 66 45 92 44; tal.tramontane@nomade.fr) in St-Martin de

Lansuscle.

Typical prices are €45 to €50 per day and €225 to €245 per week. Each outfit can reserve accommodation along the route. Though each is outside Florac, they'll transport the donkeys to town or a place of your choosing for a fee (around €1 per kilometre).

Other Activities

Cévennes Évasion (www.cevennes-evasion.com, in French; 5 place Boyer) rents out **mountain bikes** for €13/19 per half-/full day and furnishes riders with handy colour route maps. In summer it will take you for free (minimum five persons) up to the Causse Méjean, from where you can whiz effortlessly back down. It also arranges **caving**, **canyon-clambering** and **rock-climbing** expeditions (trust these guys; for the 2010 opening ceremony of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building, they hung fireworks all the way up its 828m facade). It also runs guided and independent **walking** and **cycling** holidays, where your accommodation is booked ahead and your luggage transported onwards daily.

TRAVELS WITH A DONKEY

The Cévennes were even wilder and more untamed back in October 1878, when Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson crossed them with only a donkey, Modestine, for company.

'I was looked upon with contempt, like a man who should project a journey to the moon, but yet with a respectful interest, like one setting forth for the inclement Pole,' Stevenson wrote in his *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

Accompanied by the wayward Modestine, bought for 65 francs and a glass of brandy, Stevenson took a respectable 12 days to travel the 232km on foot (Modestine carried his gear) from Le Monastier-sur-Gazelle, southeast of Le Puy-en-Velay, to St-Jean du Gard, west of Alès.

The Stevenson trail, first retraced and marked with the cross of St Andrew by a Scottish woman in 1978, is nowadays designated the GR70 and extends from Le Puy to Alès.

Whether you're swaying on a donkey or simply walking, you'll find *The Robert Louis Stevenson Trail* by Alan Castle an excellent, practical, well-informed companion. Consult also www.chemin-stevenson.org and www.gr70-stevenson.com, and pick up the free pamphlet *Sur Le Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson* (On the Robert Louis Stevenson Trail). Stocked by tourist offices, it has a comprehensive list of accommodation en route. For the lightest of travel, these organisations will haul your baggage from stage to stage:

La Malle Postale (☎06 67 79 38 16; www.lamallepostale.com, in French)

Stevenson Bagages (☎06 07 29 01 23; www.stevenson-bagages.com, in French)

Transbagages (☎04 66 65 27 75)

Sleeping

La Carline

WALKERS' ACCOMMODATION €

(02 04 66 45 24 54; www.gite-florac.fr, in French; 18 rue du Pêcher; per person €13; ☺Easter-Oct) This welcoming trekkers' favourite occupies an 18th-century house and has self-catering facilities. All rooms have corridor bathrooms and there's a pair of cosy doubles on the top floor.

Grand Hôtel du Parc

HOTEL €

(02 04 66 45 03 05; www.grandhotelduparc.fr; 47 av Jean Monestier; r €50-70; ☺mid-Mar-mid-Nov; ☺☺) This venerable building has 55 spacious rooms. It sits on extensive grounds with a pool, terrace and delightful, well-tended gardens shaded by mature cedars.

Hôtel Les Gorges du Tarn

HOTEL €

(02 04 66 45 00 63; www.hotel-gorgesdutarn.com; 48 rue du Pêcher; d €46-62; ☺Easter-Oct; ☺☺) Rooms in both the main building and annexe of this 26-room Logis de France are bright as a new pin. This said, it's worth paying the higher rate for a double in the designer-cool annexe. A pair of studios (€82) sleep up to four and have cooking facilities. Its restaurant, **Adonis** (mains €17-22, menus €16-47; ☺closed Wed) merits a visit whether or not you're staying here.

Camping Le Pont du Tarn

CAMPGROUND €

(02 04 66 45 18 26; www.camping-florac.com; site & 2 persons €16; ☺Apr-Sep; ☺) At this large, attractive, shaded campsite, 2km from Florac beside the D998, you can swim either in the heated pool or river Tarn, which runs right by.

Eating

In summer L'Esplanade, a shady, pedestrianised avenue, becomes one long dining area where you can eat both well and economically.

La Source du Pêcher

MEDITERRANEAN €€

(02 04 66 45 03 01; 1 rue de Remuret; menus €16-38; ☺Easter-Oct) Dine on the enchanting open-air terrace, perched above a pool where trout glide. The cuisine, enhanced by an extensive choice of wines, teas and coffees, is as impressive as the site at this much garlanded restaurant. On the downside, service can be very slow and they don't take reservations – so do arrive early.



Chez les Paysans

LOCAL CUISINE €

(02 04 66 31 22 07; 3 rue Théophile Roussel; mains €10-13, menus €12-15; ☺May-Oct, lunch Tue-Sat Nov-Apr) At this restaurant you can sample fresh, very reasonably priced local fare either inside or on its vine-shaded terrace. Its **shop** has a great selection of produce from small farmers in the area.



Shopping

Maison du Pays Cévenol

GOURMET FOOD

(3 rue du Pêcher) This gastronomic treasure trove sells local specialities – liqueurs, jams, Pélarodon cheeses and chestnuts in all their guises.

Biojour

ORGANIC GROCER

(5 rue du Pêcher) Just along the street from Maison du Pays Cévenol and altogether smaller, Biojour sells a range of organic produce.

THE FARM EXPERIENCE

A couple of splendid working farms, both accessible from Florac, will welcome you for a night or longer stay.

La Ferme de Vimbouches (02 04 66 31 56 55; www.causses-cevennes.com/ferme-vimbouches; r incl breakfast €50, half board per person €45; ☺Mar-Nov), where Philip trains his horses and Cathy is your welcoming hostess, is a friendly getaway superb for an overnight stop or a stay of several days, especially for families. Borrow a donkey for a day's walking, visit the pig pen and chicken run and commune with their pedigree horses, plebeian pigs, rabbits and goats. To get there from Florac, continue along the N106 towards Alès and, after 27km (it's well worth it), turn left onto the D29, following signs for Vimbouches, reached after a further 6km.

La Ferme de la Borie (02 04 66 45 10 90; www.encevennes.com, in French; incl breakfast s €23-29, d €36-44; ☺Mar-Nov) will see you bowled over by the sheer enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* of host Jean-Christophe Barthes. And you'll groan contentedly as you head to bed after a blow-out dinner of produce from his organic farm, accompanied by as much wine as you wish. Be sure to reserve – by phone or email (ferme-auberge-la-borie@orange.fr), since there's no link from the website. To get there, turn right onto the narrow C4, signed La Borie, barely a kilometre southeast of Florac on the N106.

Information

Tourist office (☎04 66 45 01 14; www.mescevennes.com, in French; 33 av Jean Monestier; ☀9am-noon & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat)

Getting There & Away

It's a pain without your own vehicle. From mid-April to mid-September, one **Transports Reilhés** (☎04 66 45 00 18, 06 60 58 58 10) minibus runs to/from Alès (€13, 1¼ hours). Monday to Saturday, leaving from the old railway station at 9am. During the rest of the year, it leaves at 8am only on Wednesday and Saturday.

Gorges du Tarn

The Tarn gushes down from the flanks of Mont Lozère. Over millennia, the river and its few tributaries have carved and weathered the deep, spectacular Gorges du Tarn. Winding southwest for about 50km from the village of Ispagnac, 9km northwest of Florac, this deep ravine marks the boundary between the Causse Méjean to its south and the Causse de Sauveterre to the north. Until the construction of the riverside road in 1905, the only way to move through the gorges was by boat. On a summer's day, when over 2500 vehicles grind through Ste-Énimie each day, this road (the D907bis) is often jammed with traffic. For much of the rest of the year, it's lightly trafficked.

STE-ÉNIMIE

POP 550

It's worth lingering a while in Ste-Énimie, where you'll find its features well signed in both French and English. Twenty-seven kilometres from Florac, 56km from Millau and midway along the gorges, it tumbles like an avalanche of grey-brown stone. Long isolated, it's now a favoured starting or finishing point for canoe or kayak descents of the Tarn.

The tiny **Écomusée Le Vieux Logis** (adult/child €2/1.50; ☀Sun, Mon & Wed-Fri mid-Jun-mid-Sep) has one vaulted room, crammed with antique local furniture, lamps, tableware and costumes.

Highlights of the small, cobbled old quarter, where most houses have been repaired and restored, are the 12th-century Romanesque **Église de Ste-Énimie**, and the **Halle aux Blés**, where cereal crops from the high Causses were bartered for wine, fresh fruit and walnut oil.

Activities

Riding the River Tarn is at its best in high summer, when the river is usually low and the descent a lazy trip over mostly calm water. You can canoe as far as the impassable Pas de Soucy, a barrier of boulders about 9km downriver from La Malène. Downstream from here, there are further possibilities.

The Ste-Énimie tourist office carries information on the veritable flotilla of companies offering **canoe** and **kayak descents** between April and September. These include **Au Moulin de la Malène** (☎04 66 48 51 14; www.canoeblanc.com) in La Malène, **Canoe 2000** (☎04 66 48 57 71; www.canoe2000.fr) in Ste-Énimie and La Malène, **Locanoë** (☎04 66 48 55 57; www.gorges-du-tarn.fr, in French) in Castelbouc and Ste-Énimie, and **Le Cano-phile** (☎04 66 48 57 60; www.canoe-tarn.com, in French) in Ste-Énimie.

Typical trips and tariffs for canoe and kayak descents: Castelbouc to Ste-Énimie (€13, 7km, two hours), Ste-Énimie to La Malène (€18, 13km, 3½ hours), Castelbouc to La Malène (€21, 20km, one day), Ste-Énimie to Les Baumes Basses (€22, 22km, one day).

If you'd rather someone else did the hard work, spend an effortless hour with **Les Bateliers de la Malène** (www.gorges.dutarn.com; ☀Apr-Oct), who, for €20.50 per person, will punt you down an 8km stretch of the gorge from La Malène, then drive you back.

Sleeping

All along the gorges, there are plenty of campgrounds to choose from.

Two splendid *chambres d'hôte* lie at each end of the Gorges du Tarn.

La Pause

B&B €

(☎05 65 62 63 06; www.hebergement-gorges.dutarn.com; rte de Caplac, Le Rozier; s/d €40/50; ☀) At the gorges' southern end, in the village of Le Rozier, La Pause has three tastefully furnished rooms decorated in attractive colours, plus a couple of suites. At breakfast, jams – fig, quince, cherry and more – are all made by your hostess, Pierrette Espinasse. To get there, turn left (signed Capluc), after the village church.

Maison de Marius

B&B €

(☎04 66 44 25 05; www.maisondemarius.fr, in French; 8 rue Pontet, Quézac; r €40-80; ☀Mar-Oct) In Quézac, at the northern limit of

the gorges near Ispagnac, each of Dany Méjean's delightful rooms has its own character, and you've never tasted sweeter water, drawn from the nearby mineral springs. To get there, skirt the village (its main street is unidirectional against you) and follow signs from the church.

Manoir de Montesquiou

HOTEL €€

(☎04 66 48 51 12; www.manoir-montesquiou.com; r €77-111; ☀Apr-Oct; 📶) This 16th-century mansion with its broad terrace overlooks the bridge in La Malène. Install yourself in one of its comfortable, traditional rooms, then reserve a table at its reputed **restaurant** (menus €28-49) For something lighter, sample one of its range of chocolate drinks or order a large slice of squishy chocolate cake.

i Information

The Ste-Énimie **tourist office** (☎04 66 48 53 44; www.gorgesdutarn.net; ☀9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm or 6pm Mon-Sat, also Sun Jul & Aug) covers all of the ravine. It stocks maps and walking guides, including the walker-friendly IGN Top 25 map No 26400T *Gorges du Tarn*. There's also a small seasonal **annexe** (☀mid-May–Aug) in La Malène.

Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses

The Grands Causses, the Massif Central's most southerly expression, are mainly harsh limestone plateau. Scorched in summer and windswept in winter, the stony surface holds little moisture as water filters through the limestone to form an underground world, ideal for cavers.

The Rivers Tarn, Jonte and Dourbie have sliced deep gorges through the 5000-sq-km plateau, creating four *causses* ('plateaux' in the local lingo): Sauveterre, Méjean, Noir and Larzac, each different in its delicate geological forms. One resembles a dark lunar surface, another's like a Scottish moor covered with the thinnest layer of grass, while the next is gentler and more fertile. But all are eerie and empty except for the occasional shepherd and his flock – and all offer magnificent walking and mountain biking.

Millau, at the heart of the park, is a good base for venturing into this wild area. The Gorges de la Jonte, where birds of prey wheel and swoop, skim the park's eastern boundary, rivalling in their rugged splendour the neighbouring, more famous Gorges du Tarn.

👁 Sights

CAUSSE DE SAUVETERRE

This, the northernmost of the *causses* is a gentle, hilly plateau dotted with a few compact and isolated farms. Every possible patch of fertile earth is cultivated, creating irregular, intricately patterned wheat fields.

CAUSSE MÉJEAN

Causse Méjean, the highest, is also the most barren and isolated. Defined to the north by the Gorges du Tarn and, southwards, by the Gorges de la Jonte, it looms over Florac on its eastern flank. It's a land of poor pasture enriched by occasional fertile depressions, where streams gurgle down into the limestone through sinkholes, funnels and fissures.

CHESTNUT: THE ALL-PURPOSE TREE

In the Cévennes, the chestnut tree (known as *l'arbre à pain*, or bread tree) provided the staple food of many families. The nuts were eaten raw, roasted and dried, or ground into flour. Blended with milk or wine, chestnuts were the essence of *bajanat*, a nourishing soup. Part of the harvest would feed the pigs while the leaves of pruned twigs and branches provided fodder for sheep and goats.

Harvested at ground level with small forks – of chestnut wood, of course – the prickly husks (called *hérissons*, or hedgehogs) were removed by being trampled upon in spiky boots. Nowadays, chestnuts are the favourite food of the Cévennes' wild boars and still feature in a number of local sauces and desserts.

Nothing was wasted. Sections of hollowed-out trunk would serve as beehives, smaller branches would be woven into baskets, while larger ones were whittled into stakes for fencing or used to build trellises. The wood, hard and resistant to parasites, was used for rafters, rakes and household furniture – everything from, quite literally, the cradle to the coffin.

This combination of water and limestone has created some spectacular underground scenery. Within the cavern of **Aven Armand** (www.aven-armand.com; adult/child €9.10/6.20; ☀10am-noon & 1.30-5pm Apr-Oct), reached by a funicular railway that drops 60 vertical metres, bristles the world's greatest concentration of stalagmites. Guided visits, lasting about 45 minutes (there's an accompanying information sheet in English) head underground about every 20 minutes. A **combination ticket** (per adult/child €12.80/8.25) also includes admission to the Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux.

CAUSSE NOIR

Rising immediately east of Millau, the 'Black Causse' is best known for the **Chaos de Montpellier-le-Vieux** (www.montpellier-leveieux.com; adult/child €5.70/4.05; ☀9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Oct), 18km northeast of Millau, overlooking the Gorges de la Dourbie. Water erosion has created more than 120 hectares of tortured limestone formations with fanciful names such as the Sphinx and the Elephant. Three trails, lasting one to three hours, cover the site, as does a **tourist train** (adult/child €3.65/2.70).

If you're here outside official opening times, there's nothing to stop you wandering around freely.

CAUSSE DU LARZAC

The Causse du Larzac is the largest of the four *causses*. An endless sweep of distant horizons and rocky steppes broken by medieval villages, it's known as the 'French Desert'.

You'll stumble across venerable, fortified villages such as **Ste-Eulalie de Cernon**, long the capital of the Larzac region, and **La Cavalerie**, both built by the Knights Templar, a religious military order that distinguished itself during the Crusades.

GORGES DE LA JONTE

The Gorges de la Jonte, 15km long, cleave east-west from Meyrueis to Le Rozier, separating in dramatic fashion the Causse Noir from Causse Méjean.

Just south of the gorge, **Dargilan** (www.grotte-dargilan.com; adult/child €8.50/5.80; ☀10am-5.30pm or 6.30pm Apr-Oct) is known as La Grotte Rose (the pink cave) for its dominant natural colouring. The most arresting moment of the one-hour, 1km tour through this vast chasm is a sudden, daz-

zling exit onto a ledge with a dizzying view of the Gorges de la Jonte way below.

Belvédère des Vautours (Vulture Viewing Point; ☎05 65 62 69 69; www.vautours-lozere.com; adult/child €6.50/3; ☀10am-5pm or 6pm Apr-Oct) is just west of Le Truel on the D996. Reintroduced after having all but disappeared locally, the vultures now freely wheel and plane in the *causses* skies and nest high in the sheer cliffs on the opposite side of the valley. The viewing point has an impressive multimedia exhibition, including live video transmission from the nesting sites. It also organises three varied half-day **birding walks** (adult/child €7/3.50; reservation essential).

i Information

Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses office (☎05 65 61 35 50; www.parc-grands-causses.fr, in French; 71 bd de l'Ayrolle, Millau; ☀9am-noon or 12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Fri)

Millau

POP 22,900

Millau (pronounced 'mee-yo') squeezes between the Causse Noir and Causse du Larzac at the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie. Though falling just over the border into the Midi-Pyrénées *département* of Aveyron, it's tied to Languedoc historically and culturally. Famous within France for glove-making, it's also the main centre for the Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses and a taking-off point for hiking and other outdoor activities – particularly hang-gliding and paragliding, exploiting the uplifting thermals.

📍 Sights

FREE Causse Gantier GLOVE MUSEUM
(bd des Gantières; ☀9.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Sat) Causse Gantier is the only company that still make gloves in Millau (all the rest import their leather goods and trade on their past reputations). Within this architecturally pleasing building, both workshop and display, you can watch craftspeople at work. Buy here and you can be certain your gloves were made on the spot.

Musée de Millau MUSEUM
(place Maréchal Foch; adult/child €5.10/free; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm Sep-Jun, closed Sun Oct-Apr) Millau's museum has a rich collection

of fossils, including a 4m-long, almost intact skeleton of a prehistoric marine reptile from the Causse du Larzac. In the basement is a huge array of plates and vases from **La Graufesenque**, in its time the largest pottery workshop in the western Roman Empire. The 1st-floor leather and glove section illustrates Millau's tanneries and their products through the ages. A **combined ticket** (€6) includes admission to La Graufesenque archaeological site, at the confluence of the Rivers Tarn and Dourbie.

Le Beffroi

BELFRY

(rue Droite; adult/child €3/free; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-Jun-Sep) Clamber up this 42m-tall belfry for a great overview of town. From its square base dating from the 12th century, you ascend as it tapers into a 17th-century octagonal tower.



Activities

Hang-gliding & Paragliding

Several outfits run introductory courses (around €350 for five days) and beginner flights with an instructor (€55 to €70). Two long-established players:

Horizon

HANG-GLIDING, PARAGLIDING

(www.horizon-millau.com, in French; 6 place Lucien Grégoire) Also offers caving, canyon descents, rock climbing and Naturaventure, a multi-adventure trail.

Roc et Canyon

HANG-GLIDING, PARAGLIDING

(www.roc-et-canyon.com, in French; 55 av Jean Jaurès) In summer it has a base beside Pont de Cureplat. Also offers caving, rock climbing, canyon descents, rafting and bungee jumping.

Rock Climbing

The high cliffs of the Gorges de la Jonte are an internationally renowned venue for climbers. Both Horizon and Roc et Canyon (p740) offer monitored climbs and can put you in touch with local climbers.

Walking & Cycling

The tourist office sells a handy box of 15 folders (€8; €1 per folder) of clearly described walks in the region, varying from one to 4½ hours. Alternatively, *Les Belles Balades de l'Aveyron* (€8) describes 22 walks in the area and also details 10 mountain-bike and 10 tourer routes.



Festivals & Events

Natural Games

SPORTS FESTIVAL

(www.naturalgames.fr) An international fes-

tival of outdoor sports such as climbing, canoeing and extreme mountain biking. Four days, end-June.

Millau Jazz Festival

JAZZ FESTIVAL

A week-long wail in mid-July.

Mondial de Pétanque

PÉTANQUE FESTIVAL

(Pétanque world series; www.millau-petanque.com, in French) Six days in mid-August. Attracts more than 10,000 players and more than twice as many spectators.



Sleeping

There are several huge riverside campgrounds along both banks of the River Tarn.

Château de Creissels

CASTLE HOTEL €€

(☎05 65 60 16 59; www.chateau-de-creissels.com; Creissels; r new wing €71-85, old wing €108; ☀Mar-Dec) In the village of Creissels, 2km southwest of Millau on the D992 and well signed, this castle has a split personality. Rooms in the old 12th-century tower breathe history while those in the 20th-century wings (most of them extensively renovated in 2010), have balconies overlooking the large garden. There's an excellent **restaurant**.

Hôtel La Capelle

HOTEL €

(☎05 65 60 14 72; www.hotel-millau-capelle.com; 7 place de la Capelle; r €48-61, with shared bathroom €30-45; ☀☀) In the converted wing of a one-time leather factory, La Capelle is a great budget choice. Rooms are large with separate bathroom and toilet and the large terrace with views towards the Causse Noir makes for a perfect breakfast spot. Some rooms have air-con (€5 supplement).



Eating

La Mangeoire

REGIONAL CUISINE €€

(☎05 65 60 13 16; 8 bd de la Capelle; lunch menu €14.50, menus €19.50-46; ☀Tue-Sun) Millau's oldest restaurant, in the vaults beneath the former city walls, serves delightful, mainly regional dishes. Its pride is the open wood-fire barbecue. In winter, spits pierce wild game such as hare and partridge. Year-round, meat and fish (€14 to €22) are sized to perfection.

La Marmite du Pêcheur

CREATIVE CONTEMPORARY €€

(☎05 65 61 20 44; 14-16 bd de la Capelle; lunch menu €14.50, mains €17-19, menus €19.50-55; ☀closed Mon & lunch Tue Jul-Sep, Tue & Wed Oct-Jun) A few doors from La Mangeoire and

PONT DE MILLAU

This toll bridge, slung across the wide Tarn Valley and bearing the A75 motorway, is a true 21st-century icon. Designed by the British architect Sir Norman Foster, it carries more than 4.5 million vehicles each year. It's a work of industrial art and an amazing feat of engineering. Only seven pylons, hollow and seemingly slim as needles, support 2.5km of four-lane motorway. Rising to 343m above the valley bottom, it ranks among the tallest road bridges in the world.

Construction cost 400 million euros, and gobbled up 127,000 cu metres of concrete, 19,000 tonnes of reinforcing steel and 5000 tonnes of cables and stays. Yet despite these heavyweight superlatives, it still looks like a gossamer thread.

Viaduc Espace (☉10am-5pm, to 7pm Apr-Oct), at ground level beneath the viaduct, has a 10-minute film that tells the story of the bridge's construction and there are 45-minute **guided visits** (in English on request; per adult/child €6/3.50).

You don't have to have a vehicle to visit the Pont de Millau. An open-top, canary-yellow **bus** (per adult/child €10/6) leaves Millau's place de la Capelle five times daily for a 1¼-hour guided tour. For a leisurely glide along the Tarn Valley and an original, crane-your-neck perspective of the bridge from below, take a 1½-hour boat trip with **Bateliers du Viaduc** (www.bateliersduviaduc.com; Creissels; adult/child €22/12.50; ☉every 45 minutes from 9.45am).

run by an engaging young couple, this place too is attractively vaulted and has hearty regional *menus* within much the same price range. Try the chef's *marmite du pêcheur à ma façon* of salmon, perch and red mullet, gambas and scallops gratin (€24).

Le Capion

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎05 65 60 00 91; 3 rue J-F Almérás; mains €15.50-19.50, lunch menu €14.50, menus €16-39; ☉Thu-Mon & lunch Tue) Peer into the kitchen to see the team at work as you walk past on the way to the larger of its two dining rooms. Portions are tasty and plentiful – none more so than the trolley of tempting homemade desserts and rich cheese platter (where, of course, Roquefort stars).

Château de Creissels restaurant

GOURMET CUISINE €€

(☎05 65 60 16 59; mains €16-22, menus €23-53; ☉Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) The castle's restaurant offers classic French cuisine, where meat lovers will savour the *menu autour de l'agneau des Grands Causses* (€34) with its two main courses of tender local lamb and ewe's-milk cheese. Enjoy great views from the terrace.

Self-catering

There are **markets** each Wednesday and Friday morning in place Maréchal Foch, place Emma Calvé and the **covered market** at place des Halles. In July and August, an **evening market** spreads over place Mancharous.



Shopping

L'Atelier du Gantier (21 rue Droite) is a wonderful little shop that sells gloves and only gloves of the softest leather. Hit the right moment and you can see staff sewing away at a trio of vintage Singer machines.

Les Vitrines du Terroir (17 bd de l'Ayrolle) and **Le Buron** (18 rue Droite) are a pair of delightfully rich, pungent cheese and gourmet food shops.



Information

ABCD PC (cnr rue Droite & rue Solignac; per hr €3; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 2.30-7.30pm Sat) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎05 65 60 02 42; www.ot-millau.fr; 1 place du Beffroi; ☉9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm, closed Sun Oct-Easter)



Getting There & Around

BICYCLE Cycles Arturi (☎05 65 60 28 23; 2 rue du Barry; ☉closed Sun Jul & Aug, Sun & Mon Sep-Jun) rents out city bikes for €9/12 per half-/full day and mountain bikes for €11/15.

BUS Millau's **bus station** (www.garerotierede millau.com, in French) is beside the train station; its **information office** (☎05 65 59 89 33) is inside. There are two buses daily to Albi (€17.80, 2¼ hours), one continuing to Toulouse (€26.80, four hours) and at least six daily services to/from Montpellier (€18, 2¼ hours).

TRAIN Train or SNCF bus connections from Millau include Montpellier (€22.10, 1¼ hours, one daily) and Rodez (€11.80, 1½ hours, five daily).

Around Millau

ROQUEFORT

POP 700

In the heart of Parc Naturel Régional des Grands Causses and 25km southwest of Millau, the village of Roquefort turns ewe's milk into France's most famous blue cheese. Its steep streets lead to the cool natural caves, where seven producers ripen 21,000 tonnes of Roquefort cheese every year.

Four producers offer visits.

La Société (www.roquefort-societe.com), established in 1842, is the largest Roquefort producer, churning out 70% of the world's supply, over 30% of which is exported. One-hour **guided tours** (adult/child €3.50/free; ☎9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm) of the caves include a fairly feeble sound-and-light show and sampling of the three varieties the company makes.

FREE Le Papillon (www.roquefort-papillon.com; ☎9.30-noon & 1-5pm or 6.30pm)

has tours of its equally pungent caves, lasting around 45 minutes and including a 15-minute film.

FREE Le Vieux Berger (www.le-vieux-berger.com, in French; ☎8.30am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri) is the smallest

of the major Roquefort producers, and the only place where you can watch staff at work. Its 18-minute promotional film is the most professional. Take the first turning right after the tourist office and follow av du Combalou for 0.5km.

FREE Gabriel Coulet (www.gabriel-coulet.fr; ☎9.30-11.50am & 1.30-4.50pm

or 5.50pm) sales outlet is good for a more rapid appreciation of the Roquefort making process. You can descend into the vaulted, penicillin-streaked caves below the shop, wander at your own pace and take in the 10-minute film.

Parking in Roquefort is a nightmare. Leave your vehicle beside Roquefort's **tourist office** (☎05 65 58 56 00; www.roquefort.fr; ☎9am-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm daily Jul & Aug), at the western entry to the village.

MICROPOLIS

Ever felt small? The mind-boggling high-tech experience of **Micropolis** (☎05 65 58 50 50; www.micropolis.biz; adult/child €11.20/7.60, audioguide €2; ☎10am-5pm, closed Mon Sep, closed Mon-Fri Oct & Mar, closed mid-Nov-Jan) happens in a building where 6m-high grass dwarfs the visitor. The swarms of facts about insect life, all compellingly present-

ed, seem equally tall but all are true. There's a 20-minute 3D film and captions are in French and English. Allow a good two hours (don't bypass its quirky, imaginative Outdoor Trail), perhaps rounding off with a snack or local speciality at the bright, reasonably priced **restaurant**. 'La Cité des Insectes' (Insect City) is off the D911, 19km northwest of Millau.

PASTORALIA

Pastoralia (☎05 65 98 10 23; www.pastoralia.com, in French; adult/child €4.80/3.50, 2 adults & 2 children €15; ☎10am-noon & 2-6pm Easter-Oct), 3km west of St-Affrique, tells the story of the 800,000 ewes who graze the high plateaus, producing nearly 200 million litres of milk annually, over half of which is turned into Roquefort and other regional cheeses. There are interactive panels with English translation, a 10-minute film, and in summer children can feed the sheep.

ROUSSILLON

Roussillon, sometimes known as French Catalonia, sits on Spain's doorstep at the eastern end of the Pyrenees. It's the land of the Tramontane, a violent wind that howls down from the mountains, chilling to the bone in winter and in summer strong enough to overturn a caravan. Roussillon's only city is Perpignan, capital of the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*.

History

Roussillon's history was for a long time closely bound with events over the Pyrenees in present-day Spain. After flourishing for a time in its own right as the capital of the kingdom of Mallorca, it fell under Aragonese rule for much of the late Middle Ages. In 1640 the Catalans on both sides of the Pyrenees revolted against the rule of distant Madrid. Peace came in 1659 with the Treaty of the Pyrenees, defining the border between Spain and France once and for all and ceding Roussillon (until then the northern section of Catalonia) to the French, much to the indignation of the locals.

Long part of Catalonia (the name which nowadays officially designates only the semi-autonomous region over the border in northeast Spain), Roussillon retains many symbols of Catalan identity. The *sardane* folk dance is still performed, and the Cata-

THE KING OF CHEESES

The mouldy blue-green veins that run through Roquefort are, in fact, the spores of microscopic mushrooms, cultivated on leavened bread.

As the cheeses are ripened in natural caves, enlarged and gouged from the mountainside, draughts of air called *fleurines* flow through, encouraging the blue *Penicillium roqueforti* to eat its way through the white cheese curds.

Roquefort ranks as one of France's most noble cheeses. In 1407 Charles VI granted exclusive Roquefort cheesemaking rights to the villagers, while in the 17th century the Sovereign Court of the Parliament of Toulouse imposed severe penalties against fraudulent cheesemakers trading under the Roquefort name.

lan language, closely related to Provençal, is fairly widely spoken.

Getting Around

Abandon your car and jump aboard the **bus**. Year round, you can travel the length and breadth of Roussillon for no more than €1 per journey, thanks to the region's ecofriendly transport policy. Pick up a leaflet from any tourist office or phone ☎04 68 80 80 80 for route details and numbers.

Perpignan

POP 118,200

Back in the 13th and 14th centuries, Perpignan (Perpinyà in Catalan) was capital of the kingdom of Mallorca, a Mediterranean power that stretched northwards as far as Montpellier and included all the Balearic Islands. The town later became an important commercial centre and remains the third-largest Catalan city after Barcelona and Lleida (Lérida) in Spain.

Still as much Catalan as French, it's far from being a 'villainous ugly town' – the sour judgement of 18th-century traveller Henry Swinburne. Today's population is a mixed one. Iberian blood flows in the veins of the descendants of the thousands of refugees who fled over the mountains at the end of the Spanish Civil War. Many other families, Arab and displaced French

settlers alike, have their recent origins in north Africa.

At the foothills of the Pyrenees and with the Côte Vermeille to its southeast, Perpignan is a good base for day trips along the coast or to the mountains and Cathar castles of the interior. It's commendably well documented; outside every major historical building is a free-standing sign with information in French, Catalan and English.

Sights

Le Castillet & Casa Païral

FOLK MUSEUM

(place de Verdun; adult/child €4/free; ☎9.30am–noon & 1.30–6pm Wed–Mon) Once a prison, the 14th-century red-brick town gate of Le Castillet is the only vestige of Vauban's fortified town walls. Inside, Casa Païral, a folklore museum, houses bits and pieces of everything Catalan – from traditional bonnets and lace mantillas to an entire 17th-century kitchen.

Place de la Loge

SQUARE

Place de la Loge has three fine stone structures. Fourteenth-century **Le Loge de Mer**, rebuilt during the Renaissance, was once Perpignan's stock exchange, then maritime tribunal. Between it and the **Palais de la Députation**, formerly seat of the local parliament, is the **Hôtel de Ville** with its typically Roussillon red-brick and pebble facade.

Palais des Rois de Majorque

PALACE

(Palace of the Kings of Mallorca; entrance on rue des Archers; adult/child €4/free; ☎10am–6pm) The Palais des Rois de Majorque sits on a small hill. Symbol of Perpignan's late-medieval splendour but now echoing and sparsely furnished, the palace was built in 1276 for the ruler of the newly founded kingdom. It was once surrounded by extensive fig and olive groves and a hunting reserve, both lost once Vauban's formidable citadel walls enclosed the palace. Pick up a guide sheet as you enter and climb the 70 steps of Tour de l'Hommage for a sweeping panorama of the Pyrenees and Mediterranean.

Cathédrale St-Jean

CATHEDRAL

(place Gambetta; ☎7.30am–6pm) Topped by a typically Provençal wrought-iron bell cage, Cathédrale St-Jean, begun in 1324 and not completed until 1509, has a flat facade of red brick and smooth, zigzagging river stones. The cavernous single nave is

marked by the fine carving and relative sobriety of its Catalan altarpiece. For centuries, Perpignan believers have venerated the engagingly naive statue of the Virgin and child in the chapel of Nostra Senyora dels Correchs in the north aisle.



Festivals & Events

As befits a town so close to the Spanish border, Perpignan is strong on fiestas.

Jeudis de Perpignan

STREET FUN

The streets come alive with stalls, theatre and music of all genres. Thursday evenings, mid-July to mid-August.

Procession de la Sanch

EASTER PROCESSION

Barefoot penitents wearing the *caprutxa* (traditional hooded robes) parade silently through the old city. Good Friday.

Fête de la Sant Joan

RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL

A 'sacred' flame is brought down from Mont Canigou. Around 23 June.

Fête du Vin

WINE FESTIVAL

To mark this wine festival, a barrel of the year's new production is ceremonially borne to Cathédrale St-Jean to be blessed. Third weekend in October.

Perpignan



Sleeping **Hôtel de La Loge**

HOTEL €

(☎04 68 34 41 02; www.hoteldelaloge.fr; 1 rue des Fabriques Nabot; s/d from €47/55; 🏠🚶🚶) Mireille and Hervé Barraud, who took over this increasingly threadbare hotel in 2010, have already stamped their personality on their new home, redecorating and refreshing while preserving the best of the attractive Catalan polished wood furniture. Of the more expensive rooms, 106 and 206 overlook place de la Loge.

Park Hotel

HOTEL €€

(☎04 68 34 14 14; www.parkhotel-fr.com; 18 bd Jean Bourrat; r from €80; 🏠🚶🚶) Each of this pleasant hotel's soundproofed rooms is individually and engagingly furnished and decorated. The *supérieure* rooms (from €100), with separate bathroom, shower cubicle and toilet, are a cut above the already attractive rest. The largest (numbers ending in 04 and 05) overlook the park. Reputed chef Alexandre Klimenko runs the hotel's Michelin one-star **Le Chap' restaurant**.

Hôtel New Christina

HOTEL €€

(☎04 68 35 12 21; www.hotel-newchristina.com; in French; 51 cours Lassus; r €93; 🏠🚶🚶) Rooms are attractively decorated in blue and beige and bathrooms, all with bathtubs, are separate from toilets. Rooms at the front overlook a public park. The open-air pool, up on the roof, has central Perpignan's only jacuzzi.

Auberge de Jeunesse

YOUTH HOSTEL €

(☎04 68 34 63 32; perpignan@fuaaj.org; allée Marc Pierre; incl breakfast €16.70; ☺Mar-mid-Nov) Perpignan's HI-affiliated youth hostel, just

north of Parc de la Pépinière, is a welcoming place with a kitchen for self-caterers.

Camping La Garrigole

CAMPGROUND €

(☎04 68 54 66 10; 2 rue Maurice Lévy; site & 2 persons €12; ☺year-round) Take bus 2 and get off at the Garrigole stop to reach this small campsite, 1.5km west of the train station.

Eating

La Galinette

GOURMET CUISINE €€

(☎04 68 35 00 90; 23 rue Jean Payra; mains €28-30, lunch menu €19; ☺Tue-Sat) In an elegant setting, La Galinette offers refined cuisine, delicately confectioned desserts and an ample selection of regional wines. For a frisson of the unexpected, go for the *menu confiance* fish menu (€55) and let the chef select the best that the sea can offer that day.

La Passerelle

FISH €€

(☎04 68 51 30 65; 1 cours Palmarole; mains €19-28, lunch menu €22; ☺Tue-Sat & dinner Mon) The attractive marine decor hints at the riches within the kitchen. La Passerelle is *the* restaurant in Perpignan for Mediterranean fish, guaranteed fresh and without a hint of freezer or fish farm.

Al Très

MODERN MEDITERRANEAN €€

(☎04 68 34 88 39; 3 rue de la Poissonnerie; mains €19-25, lunch menu €14, menu €25; ☺Tue-Sun) At this stylish place with its roughly plastered ox-blood-coloured walls and vast, carved wooden bar that could double up as an altar, you'll appreciate the freshness of the ingredients and innovative cuisine.

Laurens'O

MEDITERRANEAN FUSION €€

(☎04 68 34 66 66; 5 place des Poilus; mains €17-23, lunch menu €17; ☺Tue-Sat) This cheerful

Perpignan

Top Sight

- Casa Païral (Le Castillet) B2
Palais des Rois de Majorque C5

Sights

- 1 Cathédrale St-Jean C2
2 Hôtel de Ville B2
3 La Loge de Mer B2
4 Palais de la Députation B2

Sleeping

- 5 Hôtel de La Loge B2

Eating

- 6 Al Très B3

- 7 Au Vrai Chic Parisien B4
8 Casa Sansa B2
9 La Galinette B1
10 La Passerelle B1
11 Laurens'O B3
Le France (see 3)
12 Les Antiquaires C3

Drinking

- 13 République Café C3

Shopping

- 14 Espi B2
15 Maison Quinta B2
16 Maison Sala B3

modern locale with its striped tablecloths and orange and black decor offers innovative Mediterranean cooking. Its distinctly Italian flavour is garnished with a creative French twist and a little Thai touch here and there.

Au Vrai Chic Parisien

FRENCH €

(☎04 68 35 19 16; www.auvraichicparisien.com, in French; 14 rue Grande la Monnaie; dinner mains around €18, lunch menus €10-11.50; ☺lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Fri & Sat) No, not some snobby Parisian implant but a friendly, popular place in a popular quarter. Furniture is simple, rustic and brightly painted and walls are a clutter of posters, old menus, newspaper clippings and bric-a-brac. The midday choice is limited but tasty (try the piping-hot potato-based *tartiflette*). Weekend dinners offer Savoyard fondues and barbecued meats. And the toilets are particularly exciting (we leave you to discover why).

Les Antiquaires

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎04 68 34 06 58; place Després; mains €14-23, menus €24-43; ☺Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) The cuisine is as traditional, reliable and mature as both the clientele and the splendid line of vintage bottles displayed above the fireplace. Portions, such as the two huge dollops of chocolate mousse for dessert, are mightily generous.

Casa Sansa

CATALAN €€

(☎04 68 34 21 84; entrances 2 rue Fabrique Nadal & rue Fabrique Couverte; mains €15-39, menus €14-32) Here's another highly popular spot – or rather two adjacent places. Choose the older, more southerly one, its walls scarcely visible beneath photos of the famous and less famous who have enjoyed its fine Catalan cuisine.

Le France

MEDITERRANEAN €€

(☎04 68 51 61 71; place de la Loge; pizzas €10-15, mains €14-26; ☺noon-10pm) Le France manages to insert harmoniously the ultra-modern – right down to the all-glass hand-basins in the toilets – within the historical setting of what was once Perpignan's stock exchange. Mains are smallish but attractively presented and there's a good selection of tapas and pizzas.

Self-catering

There's a morning fresh fruit and vegetable **market** on place de la République daily except Monday. Saturday is organic day. See also Shopping.



Drinking

Républic Café

CAFÉ

(2 place de la République) Down your first coffee of the day on the busy terrace of République Café and return later to sip an aperitif and linger in its Gaudí-inspired interior, all sinuous shapes and white ceramic fragments.



Entertainment

The tourist office publishes *L'Agenda*, a comprehensive, free monthly guide to exhibitions and cultural events. *Catacult*, published monthly, and *Le Bizz*, out every two months, are what's-on tap-ins to the club scene and nightlife.



Shopping

Maison Sala

GOURMET FOOD

(1 rue Paratilla; ☺Tue-Sat & Sun morning) Along short, scented rue Paratilla, known popularly to locals as rue des Épices (Spice St), shops sell dried fruits, herbs, jams, hams, cheeses and more. Most famous is Maison Sala, run by the same family for nearly a century.

Maison Quinta

BRIC-A-BRAC

(3 rue Grande des Fabriques; ☺Tue-Sat) Take time to browse this Aladdin's cave of wares, tasteful, kitsch, utilitarian or unashamedly frivolous. They're piled high and higgledy-piggledy on three floors of this former noble mansion.

Espi

CHOCOLATES, CAKES

(43bis quai Vauban) Gorge yourself on Espi's homemade chocolates, multicoloured macaroons and tempting ice creams. They'll even, given notice, knock you up a multi-storied birthday cake. It's also a pleasant **café** serving good coffee.



Information

Net & Games (45bis av Général Leclerc; per hr €3; ☺8am or 1pm-1am Mon-Sat, 1-8pm Sun) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎04 68 66 30 30; www.perpignantalourisme.com; ☺9am-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm or 4pm Sun) In the Palais des Congrès, off promenade des Platanes.

Tourist office annexe (Espace Palmarium, place Arago; ☺10am-6pm or 7pm; closed Sun)



Getting There & Away

AIR Perpignan's airport (☎04 68 52 60 70) is 5km northwest of the town centre. Perpignan has these flights to/from the UK:

Ryanair London (Stansted)

Flybe Southampton and Birmingham (summer only)

BMI Baby Manchester

BUS A bus ride anywhere within the Pyrénées-Orientales *département* cost only €1.

From the **bus station** (av Général Leclerc), **Courriers Catalans** (www.courrierscatalans.com, in French) buses run to the following destinations:

Côte Vermeille Nine daily to/from Collioure and Port-Vendres, six continuing to Banyuls (1¼ hours)

Têt Valley Nine daily to Prades (one hour), Villefranche-de-Conflent (1¼ hours) and Vernet-les-Bains (1½ hours)

Tech Valley Frequent service to Céret (50 minutes)

CAR Rental companies include **Avis** (✎ airport 04 68 61 58 97) and **Budget** (✎ airport 04 68 61 38 85).

TRAIN Trains cross the Pyrenees to Barcelona (€37 direct, three hours, twice daily; €18.50 changing at Cerbère/Portbou, 4½ hours, at least four daily). There are frequent services to Montpellier (€23.10, 1¼ hours) via Narbonne (€10.40, 45 minutes) and Béziers (€13.70, one hour). For Carcassonne (€18.30, 1½ hours), change in Narbonne. Up to nine TGVs daily run to Paris Gare de Lyon (€108.50, five hours).

Closer to home is Cerbère/Portbou on the Spanish border (€7.50, 40 minutes, around 15 daily) via Collioure (€5.20), Port-Vendres (€5.80) and Banyuls (€6.60).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT The **Navette Aéroport** bus runs from the train station via place de Catalogne and the bus station.

BICYCLE At **Vélostation** (✎ 04 68 35 45 82), on the 1st floor beneath street level of Parking Arago, hire a bike at the rock-bottom rate of €1.50/3 per half-/full day.

BUS A ticket costs €1.10, a one-day pass is €4.10 and a 10-ticket *carte* €7.80. **Le P'tit Bus** is a free hop-on, hop-off minibus that plies a circular route around the town centre.

TAXI Accueil Perpignan Taxis (✎ 04 68 35 15 15)

Around Perpignan

CÉRET

POP 7850

It's mainly the **Musée d'Art Moderne** (www.musee-ceret.com, in French; 8 bd Maréchal Joffre; adult/child €5.50/free; ☎ 10am-6pm or 7pm, closed Tue Oct-Apr) that draws visitors

to Céret, settled snugly in the Pyrenean foothills just off the Tech Valley. Superbly endowed, the gallery's collection owes much to an earlier generation of visitors and residents, including Picasso, Braque, Chagall, Matisse, Miró and Dalí, all of whom donated their works (53 from Picasso alone).

Firmly Catalan and famous for its juicy cherries (the first pickings of the season are packed off to the French president), Céret is also a party town. First comes the **Fête de la Cerise** (Cherry Festival) in late May. Summer celebrations include **La Féria**, time of bullfights and general fun; **Fête de la Sardane**, celebrating the *sardane*, Catalan folk dance par excellence; and **Les Méénnes**, primarily a festival of classical music.



Hôtel des Arcades (✎ 04 68 87 12 30; www.hotel-arcades-ceret.com; r €44-60; ☎) is a friendly hotel overlooking place Picasso with its monumental plane trees and a sizeable hunk of the old town ramparts. Run with panache by a dynamic brother and sister duo, it's a gallery in its own right, where just about every square centimetre of wall space has a poster, photo or print.

Céret's **tourist office** (✎ 04 68 87 00 53; www.ot-ceret.fr, in French; 1 av Clemenceau; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat) is just around the corner from the gallery.

Hourly buses run to/from Perpignan (50 minutes). If you're driving, aim for the well-situated Musée d'Art Moderne car park.

TAUTAVEL

The Arago Cave, on the slopes above the village of Tautavel, 27km northwest of Perpignan along the D117, has yielded a human skull, estimated to be 450,000 years old, along with a host of other prehistoric finds. The **Musée de Préhistoire** (Prehistory Museum; www.tautavel.com, in French; av Jean Jaurès; adult/child incl audioguide €8/4; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm) has a full-size reproduction of the cave (in season, cameras show in real time archaeologists excavating the real cave), together with holograms, dioramas, TVs dispensing knowledge from every corner and lots of fossilised bones and stone tools. The ticket includes entry to a secondary exhibition, at **Musée des Premiers Habitants d'Europe**, a signed 300m away. Allow a good 1½ hours to take in both venues.

THE CATHARS

The term *le Pays Cathare* (Cathar Land) recalls the cruel Albigensian Crusade – theounding and extermination of a religious sect called the Cathars.

The Cathars were the fundamentalists of their day: people of extreme beliefs, warily regarded by the mainstream yet convinced that they alone knew the one true way to salvation. Cathars (from the Greek word *katharos* meaning 'pure') believed that God's kingdom was locked in battle with Satan's evil world and that humans were base at heart. But, they reckoned, a pure life followed by several reincarnations could free the spirit. Reacting against worldly Rome and preaching in *langue d'oc*, the local tongue, the sect gained many followers. Their most extreme followers were the ascetic *parfaits* (perfectionists), who followed strict vegetarian diets and abstained from sex.

In 1208 Pope Innocent III preached a crusade against the Cathars. The Albigensian Crusade had a political as much as spiritual dimension, giving northern rulers the chance to expand their domains by ingesting Languedoc.

After long sieges, the major Cathar centres in Béziers, Carcassonne, Minerve and the dramatically sited fortresses of Montségur, Quéribus and Peyrepertuse were taken and hundreds of 'perfectionists' were burned as heretics. In Béziers as many as 20,000 faithful were slaughtered. Montségur witnessed another cruel massacre in 1244, when 200 Cathars, refusing to renounce their faith, were burned alive in a mass funerary pyre. In 1321 the burning of the last 'perfectionist', Guillaume Bélibaste, marked the end of Catharism in Languedoc.

CATHAR FORTRESSES

You can visit the four major Cathar fortresses in a day's drive from Perpignan or, with an earlier start, from Carcassonne.

When the Albigensian Crusade forced the Cathars into the mountains that once marked the frontier between France and Aragon, they sought refuge in these inaccessible strongholds that had long protected the border. Each clings to a clifftop, offers a dramatic wraparound panorama and requires a short, stiff climb from its car park. This is wild country, hot as hell in summer, so be sure to pack extra water.

Puilaurens (adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☉10am–dark Feb–mid-Nov) last saw action as a prison. **Peyrepertuse** (☎04 68 45 40 55; adult/child €5/3, audioguide €4; ☉9am–8.30pm Jun–Aug, 10am–5pm or 7pm Sep–May) is the largest, with a drop of several hundred metres on all sides. **Quéribus** (☎04 68 45 03 69; adult/child €5/3, audioguide €2; ☉9am–8pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am–7pm Apr–Jun & Sep, 10am–5pm or 6.30pm Oct–Mar) was the site of the Cathars' last stand in 1255, and **Aguilar** (☎04 68 45 51 00; adult/child €3.50/1.50; ☉10am–7pm mid-Jun–Sep, 10.30am–5.30pm Apr–mid-Jun, 11am–5pm Oct–mid-Nov) is the smallest and sadly in need of care and attention.

For more on Catharism, call up www.payscathare.org. You might want to invest €3 in a *Passeport des Sites du Pays Ca-*

thare, which gives reductions to 20 sites, major and minor.

Têt Valley

Fruit orchards carpet the lower reaches of the Têt Valley. Beyond the strategic fortress town of Villefranche-de-Conflent, the scenery becomes wilder, more open and undulating as the valley climbs towards Spanish Catalonia and Andorra.

PRADES

POP 6750

Prades is an attractive town with houses of river stone and brick, liberally adorned with pink marble from nearby quarries. At the heart of the Têt Valley and 44km from Perpignan, it's internationally famed for its annual classical music festival.

The bell tower of **Église St-Pierre** (☉9am–noon & 2–6.30pm) is all that remains of the original Romanesque church, rebuilt in the 17th century. The wonderfully expressive, ill-lit 17th-century *Entombment of Christ* at its western end is by the Catalan sculptor Josep Sunyer, who also carved the exuberant main altarpiece, a *chef-d'œuvre* of Catalan baroque.

FREE Musée Pablo Casals (☎04 68 96 28 55; 33 rue de L'Hospice; ☉10am–noon & 2–5pm Tue–Fri) commemorates the

world-renowned Spanish cellist, who settled in Prades after fleeing Franco's Spain. **Festival Pablo Casals** (www.prades-festival-casals.com), held over two weeks in late July or early August, brings top-flight classical musicians to this small town.

Hiking & Walking Around Prades details 20 easy to moderate **walks** lasting from 1¼ to 3½ hours. *Six Grandes Randonnées en Conflent* (in French) describes six more challenging day walks, including the classic ascent of Mont Canigou (2784m), an emotive symbol for Catalans on both sides of the border. The tourist office sells both (€3 each).

Prades' **tourist office** (☎04 68 05 41 02; www.prades-tourisme.fr; 10 place de la République; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) is on the main square.

Cycles Flament (8 rue Arago; ☀Tue-Sat), just off place de la République, rents bikes (per half-/full day €10/13).

There's a robust general **market** on place de la République every Tuesday and a **farmers market** each Saturday.

VILLEFRANCHE-DE-CONFLENT

POP 240

Villefranche, hemmed in by tall cliffs, sits at the strategic confluence of the valley of the Rivers Têt and Cady (hence the 'de Conflent' in its name). It's encircled by thick fortifications built in the 17th century to augment the original 11th-century defences, which have survived intact.

The fortress high above town, built by Vauban and strengthened under Napoléon III, is the heavily promoted **Château-Fort Liberia** (www.fort-liberia.com, in French; adult/

child €6/3.50; ☀10am-6pm), offering spectacular views.

Villefranche's **tourist information point** (☎04 68 96 22 96; www.villefranchedeconflent.fr, in French; 2 rue St-Jean; ☀10.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm) abuts the entrance to the spectacular **ramparts** (adult/child €4/free; ☀10am-7pm or 8pm Jun-Sep, variable rest of year), beside the western Porte d'Espagne.

Leave your vehicle in one of the car parks outside each of the two main town gates.

VERNET-LES-BAINS

POP 1550

Busy in summer and a ghost town for the rest of the year, this charming little spa was much frequented by the British aristocracy in the late 19th century. Vernet has the status of *village arboréum* in recognition of more than 300 varieties of trees that flourish on its slopes, many brought in as seeds by overseas visitors (the tourist office carries pamphlets describing in French four 1km to 2km walks beneath their canopy).

Vernet is a great base for **mountain biking** and **hiking** – particularly for attacking **Mont Canigou** (2784m). The tourist office has a pamphlet in English detailing walking routes from the village. To bag the summit an easier way, bounce up in a 4WD (€25 per person return) with **Garage Villacèque** (☎04 68 05 51 14; rue du Conflent) or **Jeeps de Canigou** (☎04 68 05 99 89; 17 bd des Pyrénées) as far as Les Cortalets (2175m), from where the summit is a three-hour return hike.

Randonnées dans la Vallée de Cady et le Massif du Canigou (€6), in French and with detailed maps, describes a holiday's worth of less demanding treks. The free pamphlet *Espace VTT-FFC Le Canigou*, in French, describes 12 signed mountain-bike trails that snake out from the village.

The **tourist office** (☎04 68 05 55 35; www.ot-vernet-les-bains.fr; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, also open Sat May-Sep) is on place de la République, the main square. Upstairs, there's a well-mounted free exhibition recounting Vernet's past.

Côte Vermeille

The Côte Vermeille (Vermilion Coast) runs south from Collioure to Cerbère on the Spanish border, where the Pyrenees foothills dip to the sea. Against a backdrop of vineyards and pinched between the Mediterranean

RIDING THE CANARY

Carrying nearly half a million passengers during the three peak months of high summer, **Le Train Jaune** (Yellow Train; 4 daily Jun-Sep, 2 daily Oct-May), nicknamed The Canary, runs from Villefranche-de-Conflent (427m) to Latour de Carol (1231m) through spectacular Pyrenean scenery. For the most spectacular stretch, jump aboard for **Mont Louis** (return adult/child €18.20/9.20) or **Font Romeu** (return adult/child €22.20/11.20). You can't make reservations, and it's wise to arrive a good hour before departure in high summer.

and the mountains, it's riddled with small, rocky bays and little ports.

If you're driving from Perpignan, leave the N114 at exit 13 and follow the lovely coastal road all the way to Banyuls.

COLLIOURE

POP 3000

Collioure, where boats bob against a backdrop of houses washed in soft pastel colours, is the smallest and most picturesque of the Côte Vermeille resorts. Once Perpignan's port, it found fame in the early 20th century when it inspired the fauvist artists Henri Matisse and André Derain and later both Picasso and Braque.

In summer Collioure is almost overwhelmed by visitors, drawn by its artistic reputation (there are over 30 galleries and workshops), its wine and the chance to buy the famed Collioure anchovies at source.

Across the creek is the **Château Royal** (adult/child €4/2; ☎10am-4.15pm or 5.15pm), which enjoyed its greatest splendour as the summer residence of the kings of Mallorca. Vauban added its towering defensive walls in the 17th century.

The medieval church tower of **Notre Dame des Anges** (☎9am-noon & 2-6pm), at the northern end of the harbour, once doubled as a lighthouse. Inside is a superb altarpiece, crafted by the Catalan master Josep Sunyer.

Collioure's **Musée d'Art Moderne** (rte de Port-Vendres; adult/child €2/free; ☎10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, closed Tue Sep-Jun) has a good collection of 20th-century and contemporary canvases.

Just beside the museum's entrance gate, the **Cellier des Dominicains** (☎04 68 82 05 63; ☎9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Apr-Sep, closed Sun Oct-Mar) is the showcase for more than 150 local wine producers.

FREE **Moulin de la Cortina** (☎10am-noon Wed & Sat Apr-Sep) is an easy 20-minute round-trip ascent through olive

and almond groves. From the terrace of this restored 14th-century windmill there are sweeping views of the bay.

For a different but equally compelling lower-level perspective of Collioure and its castle, dine on the terrace of **La Voile de Neptune** (☎04 68 82 02 27; www.leneptune-collioure.com, in French; salads €11-13, mains €19-30; ☎Apr-Oct), its rigid sails poking across the bay, or sample the exquisite food of its Michelin-starred parent restaurant **Neptune** (menus €38-79, mains €19-30; closed Tue Apr-Sep, Tue & Wed rest of year), just above.

The **tourist office** (☎04 68 82 15 47; www.collioure.com; ☎9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun) is on place 18 Juin.

Between May and September, leave your car in Parking Cap Dourats, at the top of the hill that plunges down to the village, and take the shuttle bus that runs to the village every 10 minutes. Year-round, there's a large car park behind the castle.

PORT-VENDES

POP 4500

Three kilometres south of Collioure, Port-Vendres, Roussillon's only natural harbour and deep-water port, has been exploited ever since Greek mariners roamed the rocky coastline. Until the independence of France's North African territories in the 1960s, it was an important port linking them with the mainland. It's still a significant cargo and fishing harbour with everything from small coastal chuggers to giant deep-sea vessels bristling with radar. There's also a large leisure marina.

The **tourist office** (☎04 68 82 07 54; www.port-vendres.com; 1 quai François Joly; ☎9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm or 6pm Mon-Sat) is in the port's northwest corner.

PAULILLES

Part industrial relic, part nature walk, this 35-hectare coastal site is between Port-

FAUVISTES & COLLIOURE

'No sky in all France is bluer than that of Collioure. I only have to close the shutters of my room and there before me are all the colours of the Mediterranean.' So effused Henri Matisse (1869–1954), doyen of *les Fauves* (the Wild Animals), who worked with pure colour, filling their canvases with firm lines and stripes, rectangles and bright splashes.

The **Chemin du Fauvisme** (Fauvism Trail) is a walking route around Collioure that takes you by 20 reproductions of works that Matisse and his younger colleague André Derain painted while living here. The tourist office carries a French-language guide booklet (€5.50).

THE HIGH ROAD

This 15km alternative drive between Port-Vendres and Banyuls is a wonderful way to escape the summer coastal crawl and get the wind whistling through your hair. On the D914 southeast of Port-Vendres, turn right at a sharp bend, just beyond the Cave Tambour wine producer's booth (don't call by; you'll need to keep your faculties sharp!). Signed Medallac, and Circuit du Vignoble, the D86 winds inland, tight and single lane for most of its length. Views are breathtaking as, scarcely more than a track, it climbs above vineyards, almond and fig groves, through scrub and past bare schist outcrops.

Vendres and Banyuls. Remote, as befits a one-time dynamite factory, it was set up by the Swede Alfred Nobel, founder of the Nobel prize, and subsequently abandoned for over a quarter of a century. Haunting photos and text (in English too), inside the former **director's house** (admission free; ☎9am-1pm & 2-7pm, closed Tue Oct-Apr) tell of the hard lives and close community of workers, whose explosives helped to blast the Panama Canal, Trans-Siberian Railway and Mont Blanc Tunnel.

BANYULS

POP 4750

Banyuls, 7km south of Port-Vendres, is noted for its wines – particularly robust reds and dessert varieties.

Aquarium du Laboratoire Arago (☎04 68 88 73 39; adult/child €4.80/2.40; ☀9am-noon & 2-6.30pm, to 8.30pm summer) is at the promenade's southern limit. This aquarium, which displays local Mediterranean marine life (and a collection of more than 250 stuffed sea and mountain birds), is also the oceanographic research station of Paris' Université Pierre et Marie Curie.

More strenuously aquatic but well worth the effort is **snorkelling** for free around the *sentier soumarin*, a 500m **underwater trail**. Just off Plage de Peyrefite, midway between Banyuls and Cerbère and within a protected marine area, it has five underwater information points. You can hire fins and masks (€7; from noon to 5pm in July and August). If you have your own gear, you can swim the trail at any time during these two months.

FREE Cellier des Templiers (www.banyuls.com; rte du Mas Reig; ☀10am-7.30pm), 1.75km inland, gives you the chance to sample the robust red and rosé wines of Banyuls and Collioure. Tours are preceded by a 15-minute video (you'll probably loathe its posturing chef), subtitled in English, and followed by a tasting.

Banyuls' **tourist office** (☎04 68 88 31 58; www.banyuls-sur-mer.com, in French; av de la République; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat) overlooks the pebbly beach.

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